Social mobility and VET
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Social mobility and VET

Giorgos Tsakarissianos

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to discuss social mobility within the broader context of socioeconomic developments in modern societies and to analyse the role of education systems and particularly VET in reproducing social stratification.

Social mobility is defined either as a result of class structural changes, changes in socioeconomic and occupational structures (absolute mobility) or as ‘social fluidity’ meaning mobility within the class structure (relative mobility) influenced by the relative chances individuals from different social origins have of occupying different class positions. The paper provides an insight into social mobility trends in Europe based on empirical data and findings of comparative research focused on the second half of the last century.

Social mobility theories and research projects have focused on the role of education as determinant of the class position that an individual comes to occupy; based on research projects and selected case studies, the paper examines the relationships between class origins and educational attainment, and educational attainment and class destination. Social background, cultural capital, income distribution and educational resources have a critical role to play. This paper discusses the impact of certain policy interventions and educational reforms – notably those aimed to affect the hierarchical relation and promote parity of esteem between general and vocational education routes – on the reduction of inequalities in educational attainment.

Considering current trends (new skills and competences, new recruitment criteria), which may hamper traditional educational policies, as well as the association between education (credentials) and job-placement, this contribution examines how VET could match emerging requirements of the labour market and overcome rather than reinforce social inheritance effects.
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Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) should be approached within the broader concept of human resource development that comprises both the supply side of human resources and the demand side, as well as the relation/interaction between supply and demand of the labour force. The supply side covers people who have acquired skills in various types and fields of formal and non-formal education and training including VET, whereas the demand side covers the labour market, its job requirements, work ethics and norms that affect transition from education to the labour market and the employment of workers.

Within this context, the objective of this contribution is to:

(a) discuss social mobility within the broader context of socioeconomic developments in modern societies and how social mobility is affected by current trends and developments;
(b) investigate the role of education systems and particularly VET in reproducing social status and stratification;
(c) analyse and judge to what extent and under which conditions education/VET can promote social mobility and reduce educational inequalities;
(d) examine the current situation and trends in the labour market in relation to new recruitment criteria, and new skills demanded by the labour market.

Given that new conditions in the market may hamper education/VET policies that aim to reduce social inequalities in educational attainment, this contribution will examine if and how education, including VET (1) can overcome rather than reinforce class barriers and inequalities. Several aspects and interacting factors will need to be considered, and particularly social inheritance effects in association with education and occupational destinations.

Following this short introduction, the first section provides a set of definitions and concepts related to social mobility, that is social status and position, social stratification and occupational structure, as well as a brief presentation of class theories and typologies. This paper is not an attempt at in depth analysis of theories; its purpose is to present basic concepts and definitions that will enable analysis of social mobility in modern societies in relation to education as an intermediating factor between class origins and destinations.

The second section provides an insight into social mobility trends in Europe based on

(1) In this contribution, we will use the term ‘education’ in a generic manner that encompasses VET as part of the formal education system. Section 4 is nevertheless dedicated to research that has investigated the specific role of VET on social stratification and mobility.
empirical data and findings of comparative research focused on the last 30 years of the 20th century.

Whether education can make a difference to social class inequalities has been widely debated; the third section discusses the mediating role of education between class origin and destination (origin/education/destination schema) and particularly analyses social inheritance effects on educational attainment based on findings and data of selected case studies. In this section education is addressed in its broader sense including VET as part of the formal education system.

The fourth section is mostly concerned with VET and its particular contribution to social reproduction and mobility. It is also concerned with comprehensive versus selective education to discuss the impact of certain educational reforms – aimed at transforming the hierarchical relation between general and vocational pathways – on the reduction of educational inequalities.

The fifth section addresses the issue of soft skills and how emerging requirements in the labour market and recruitment criteria, which emphasise soft skills rather than (or beside) educational credentials, affect VET curricula and redefine inequalities of opportunity.

The concluding section presents the basic conclusions and outcomes.

The paper is primarily based on desk research: surveys and research papers on social mobility and education, reports on education and VET policy documents, thematic reports, as well as articles and publications. Desk research also included electronic sources (websites, documents available through the Internet) and selected bibliography.
1. Social mobility: definitions and conceptual framework

Social mobility is defined as the degree to which, in a given society, individuals’ offspring and subsequent generations move up (and down) the social scale or as the degree to which individuals’ social standing can change throughout the course of their lives. Although both definitions are applicable, social mobility is usually envisaged by relevant sociological research as the intergenerational movement between social origin and destination rather than within a life-course perspective. Theoretical approaches to social mobility refer to a set of interrelated concepts that involve social stratification and occupational structure, social status and position, as well as typologies of social class composition.

In sociological analysis the definition of class has been a rather controversial issue as it reflects varying and confronting sociopolitical and philosophical perceptions. In a broad sense, social classes consist of large groups of people who occupy a similar position in wider society based on property ownership, income and wealth, prestige, education, skills or authority in the social and economic sphere. In the context of different class theories and typologies (Section 1.1), class division is related to various social stratification schemes and hierarchical structures depending on the criteria and factors implemented to differentiate classes.

Social stratification is perceived as the differentiation of a given population into hierarchically related social classes and positions. Social position refers to individuals’ standing whereas social class is defined beyond individuals at societal level. Such stratification is a permanent characteristic of any organised social setting, although in many different hierarchical structures and forms defined by socioeconomic and cultural variables. Social mobility is understood as the transition of people from one social position to another or the movement of individuals among the positions defined by the structure of the division of labour (Durkheim, 1997; Stinchcombe, 1997).

Social status is the standing, the recognition, influence or prestige attached to one’s position in society. Even if social status is determined to a great extent by social position, it is often perceived in a broader sense that involves several elements identifiable in a specific social context. In different social settings an individual’s social position may carry different social status influenced by cultural and socioeconomic variables. Even in a specific socioeconomic setting, the prestige or recognition attached to social positions may considerably change across time following institutional, economic and political transformations. Therefore, social status seems to be a rather vague concept that does not always help analysis of social stratification and mobility issues.

Occupational position and stratification: an individual’s occupational position is not identical to either social class or status, however it is obviously closely related to both. If class is defined in terms of economic resources and interests, for the majority of individuals
occupation is the best indicator of these. Though occupational position does not capture all aspects of class, it is probably the best single indicator of it. Thus, the occupational structure not only contains the main dimensions of social stratification, but it also serves as the connecting link between different institutions and spheres of social and economic life. ‘The hierarchy of prestige strata and the hierarchy of economic classes have their roots in the occupational structure; so does the hierarchy of political power and authority’ (Blau and Duncan, 1978) (2). Hence, occupational position gives great insight into social position, stratification and class differentiation, as well as into the mobility of individuals across different hierarchical social positions.

1.1. Social class: theories and typologies

Social mobility is conceptually related to social class or social position within an existing hierarchical structure, since it describes individuals’ movement up and down the social scale. As mentioned above, the definition of social class has been a rather complicated and controversial issue as it implies different theoretical and political approaches to social stratification and class antagonism.

In open market societies, class and economic wealth are strongly correlated and, therefore, often difficult to differentiate. Thus, membership in an upper social class provides more opportunities for wealth and power. Economic prosperity is an indicator often related to social class, though in certain societies (the caste system) they are different entities altogether. In newly formed societies with little or no established tradition the reverse is true: accumulated wealth precipitates the leaders of future generations.

Many different schemes have been used by sociological theorists to identify social classes or divisions of rank and wealth, the difficulty being always that the same individuals may fall into several ranks in relation to different criteria and dimensions of social class identification. According to Marxist theorists, the identification of social classes is based on the relationship to the means of production and the power to determine the distribution of wealth; in the Marxian approach, classes are considered as social actors and conflict groups.

Sociologists influenced by the theoretical statements of Max Weber analyse social class in terms of status, prestige, market and work situation, occupation, income and education. Classes are defined in terms of groupings of related class situations (conditions) that form the determinants of individual life chances. The idea of class situation differentiates Weber’s idea even more from the Marxists’ view on class division. In the Marxist tradition, social class division does not refer to categories of occupations, status or levels of income; classes are

(2) The specific goals of Blau and Duncan in their work *The American occupational structure* were to compare the findings concerning mobility in American society with those found in studies in Great Britain, Sweden, and Denmark, and the like. The authors also aimed to study how certain factors of social origin such as race, number of siblings, migration versus indigenous, community size, etc., affect occupational achievement and development.
phenomena of the organisation of production. In the Weberian sense class situations are phenomena of the commercial life of a society; individuals’ class situation is seen as their market situation, namely the power that people can exercise in the labour, commodity and capital markets determined by goods and labour services they possess and bring to the market to create their income (Scott, 1996).

Dahrendorf (1959) analyses classes as interest groups that arise from structural conditions and affect structural social changes through their actions. The structural condition considered is the distribution of authority within necessarily coordinated associations. Classes are dichotomous interest groups, which are related to participation or non-participation in the exercise of authority.

Defining social classes in a neo-Weberian sense, Daniel Bell – the theorist of post-industrial society (3) – rather emphasises knowledge, skills and qualifications. In his view, in industrial societies capital was the central resource and the capitalist class dominant. In post-industrial society knowledge is expected to become the major resource and the knowledge class occupies the dominant position. The emergence of the post-industrial, information society will transform traditional class distinction giving rise to the educated middle class.

To illustrate the neo-Weberian approach, Anthony Giddens (1973) who develops the concept of structuration of class relationships can be quoted. His key notion is market capacity based on three main factors: (a) ownership of property in means of production; (b) possession of educational and technical qualifications; and (c) possession of manual labour-power. While Giddens’ work is mainly theoretical, the neo-Weberian operationalisation and measurement of class structure can be primarily linked to John Goldthorpe and his colleagues (Goldthorpe, 1980; 1987; Erikson et al., 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992). The class schema proposed by them is called EGP classification and contains 11 classes in its most detailed form.

1.1.1. The EGP class schema

The EGP class schema (Erickson et al., 1979) was introduced to distinguish social classes, which differ in terms of labour–market position, the position in production units and employment relations. The EGP schema allocates (occupational) positions to classes to capture the major dimensions of positional differentiations that are determinant of the distribution of life chances. In this context, class analysis is based on the empirical investigation of the consequences of a class structure defined ex ante (Breen, 2004), namely interests and attitudes people may have or their children’s educational attainment depending

(3) Bell (1974). Five dimensions of post-industrial society: (a) good-producing to service economy, (b) dominance of professional and technical class, (c) centrality of theoretical knowledge, (d) future orientation, (e) scientific decision-making – intellectual technology. Bell believed that as industrialisation advanced, technology would gradually replace blue-collar workers; a corresponding rise in demand for services would lead to the emergence of information as the central indicator of class. Those who possess the ability to handle information – including professional and technicians – to provide services would form a new prominent middle class, whereas blue-collars would largely disappear (Noble, 2003).
on the cultural and economic resources they possess (Section 3.2).

Three major class situations are proposed: employers, self-employed workers without employees, and employees. Employees naturally represent the largest group of earners within the wider three class positions. Further distinction is introduced according to the type of employment relations: a service relationship, a labour contract or an intermediate between the two relationships, and occupation. The EGP schema in its extensive version distinguishes 11 classes, although it is usually implemented in more inclusive versions, such as the Casmin schema (comparative analysis of social mobility in industrial nations): a seven-class version that was applied for the needs of the Casmin project (\(^4\)). The project also developed the Casmin educational classification scheme to combine educational qualifications from different countries and enable cross-national comparative analysis.

Table 1: The EGP class schema

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Employment relations</th>
<th>Casmin version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Higher-grade professionals, administrators and officials; managers in large industrial establishments; large proprietors</td>
<td>Employer or service relationship</td>
<td>I+II Service class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Lower-grade professionals, administrators and officials; higher-grade technicians; managers in small industrial establishments; supervisors of non-manual employees</td>
<td>Service relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIIa</td>
<td>Routine non-manual employees, higher-grade (administration and commerce)</td>
<td>Intermediate ((^5))</td>
<td>III Routine non-manual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIIb</td>
<td>Routine non-manual employees, lower-grade (sales and services)</td>
<td>Labour contract</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IVa</td>
<td>Small proprietors, artisans, etc., with employees</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>IVab Non-farm petty bourgeoisie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IVb</td>
<td>Small proprietors, artisans, etc., without employees</td>
<td>Self employed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^4\) Casmin project: the project used data from the late 1960s and early or mid 1970s to compare patterns of social mobility between nine European countries and Australia, Japan and the US. The Casmin project led to The constant flux (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Occupation Description</th>
<th>Employment Relationship</th>
<th>Additional Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IVc</td>
<td>Farmers and smallholders; other self-employed workers in primary production</td>
<td>Employer or self employed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Lower-grade technicians; supervisors of manual workers</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>V + VI Technicians, supervisors and skilled manual workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Skilled manual workers</td>
<td>Labour contract</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIIa</td>
<td>Semi and unskilled manual workers (not in agriculture, etc.)</td>
<td>Labour contract</td>
<td>VIIa Semi and unskilled manual workers (not in agriculture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIIb</td>
<td>Semi and unskilled manual workers in agriculture</td>
<td>Labour contract</td>
<td>VIIb Semi and unskilled manual workers in agriculture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Higher grade, routine non-manual occupations (IIIa) and lower technical and manual supervisory occupations (V) ‘comprise positions with associated employment relationships that would appear characteristically to take on a very mixed’ (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992) and which are labelled ‘intermediate’, i.e. between a service relationship and a labour contract.

The EGP class schema has adopted a class-structural perspective that derived from the discussion of different conceptual contexts, within which the study of social mobility may be undertaken. The class-structural schema has provided the basis for numerous ‘mobility tables’ correlating empirical data through which the authors have attempted to analyse social mobility (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992, Section 2). The assumptions underlying the EGP schema as well as the related methodical context have been used by several researchers to support social mobility analysis within certain national contexts and cross-country comparative studies; some are presented in the following sections.

Although other typologies are also applicable, the EGP schema – along with its underlying theoretical context – is generally considered adequate and sufficiently comprehensive to reflect the complexity and the wide range of the occupational structure in modern societies that could not be limited in rough groupings and simplistic classification schemes. ‘The aim of the class schema is to differentiate positions within labour markets and production units or, more specifically, to differentiate such positions in terms of the employment relations that they entail’ (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992, p. 36). An important characteristic of the neo-Weberian class analysis is that classes and occupational positions assigned to them are of interest to the extent that they shape life chances. The distinctions captured in the EGP class schema are held to produce differences in life chances: class position is the determinant of ‘experience of affluence or hardship, of economic security or insecurity, of prospects of continuing material advance, or of unyielding material constraints’ (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992, p. 236).
Because it associates occupational positions with corresponding class positions, the EGP schema provides an analytical framework to examine social mobility in relation with education as an important determinant of occupational position and related life chances. It is within this context that social mobility research examines the relationship between class origin and education as well as between education and socio-occupational destinations.

This contribution neither intends to address the whole range of issues related to social mobility in industrial societies, nor aims to present in depth the theories underlying social and occupational structures in their historical evolution. Its purpose is to present basic concepts that will enable analysis of social mobility in modern societies and education as an intermediating factor between the class origin and destination; and additionally to judge the importance of certain measures and educational policies in affecting the role of education and training.

1.2. Social mobility: absolute mobility and social fluidity

Social mobility is usually perceived as a positive trait, but it is a two-sided process that entails both upward and downward mobility. A common error when discussing social mobility is to disregard upward mobility’s negative aspects, along with downward mobility. If people can manage an upward shift in their social position, they can just as easily or maybe more easily slip downward, although there may be certain conditions that favour upward rather than downward mobility.

Another common error is to focus on a few exemplary cases while neglecting average cases, to focus on individual cases rather than on social groups. The fact that individuals who originated from lower classes have managed to reach higher levels in the social scale does not necessarily prove that society, in general, enjoys high rates of social mobility. However, more moderate degrees of social mobility occur regularly; for example, an unskilled worker may eventually acquire the expertise necessary to move to a higher-paying job and become a part of the middle class.

Box 1: Types of social mobility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intragenerational mobility</th>
<th>refers to the social mobility within a single generation. It is measured by comparing the occupational status of an individual at two or more points in time. Thus if a person begins their working life as an unskilled manual worker and 10 years later is employed as an accountant, they are socially mobile in terms of intragenerational mobility.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intergenerational mobility</td>
<td>refers to the social mobility between generations. It is measured by comparing occupational status of children with that of parents. Thus, if the son of an unskilled worker becomes an accountant, he is socially mobile in terms of intergenerational mobility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute mobility</td>
<td>refers to the total mobility, which takes place in a society. It is measured by figures, which reveal the numbers of individuals within each class who have been socially mobile.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mobile, i.e. the absolute number or proportion of people in a social group who are upwards or downwards mobile.

**Relative mobility** on the other hand, is calculated by comparing the mobility prospects of different social groups at the same point in time. Relative mobility is concerned with the chances (or the degree of inequality in chances) people from different backgrounds have of attaining different positions.

*Source: Covington, 1997.*

As mentioned above (Section 1), social mobility is usually envisaged by relevant sociological research as the intergenerational movement between social origin and destination rather than within a life-course perspective (intragenerational mobility).

Intragenerational mobility studies look at the changes in social and occupational position during an individual’s life and particularly between the social class of first job and of current job in a specific time, although more complicated studies seek to capture individuals’ detailed career trajectories. ‘The data demands for the study of class career mobility are far greater than for the study of intergenerational class mobility and it is perhaps no accident that the kind of large cross-national comparative studies of intergenerational mobility. […] have no counterpart in the study of career mobility’ (Breen, 2004, p. 3).

Intergenerational mobility can be a consequence either of changes in the socioeconomic structure (structural changes) and/or of social fluidity between classes within a relatively stable class and occupational structure. We could suppose that social fluidity is likely to increase when structural changes occur. This is not always the case; it is not clear whether increased rates of absolute mobility improved by structural changes at societal level are associated with a significant increase in relative class opportunities that affect social fluidity rates.

**Box 2: Social fluidity and absolute mobility – Schumpeter’s illustration**

Schumpeter attempted to illustrate the differences between social fluidity and absolute mobility using the example of a residential hotel.

‘For many years, an oddly designed residential hotel remained in its original, roughly pyramidal form, with the rooms improving from the bottom floor to the top. Over this period, “mobility” could only occur by individuals changing rooms; and, since the hotel was always full, such mobility had to be quite symmetrical: for every resident who moved up to a better room, another had to move down to a worse room. The extent of such movement is an expression of “fluidity” effects.

However, after a time the hotelier decided to upgrade his establishment, and did so by reducing the number of rooms on the bottom floor while expanding at the top. As a result of this development, therefore, some “upward” mobility could occur in an asymmetrical way: some residents could move up without any having to move down.

Schumpeter’s hotel illustrates the single most important finding of mobility research: the
effects of “class structural change” are far more important than fluidity effects in regard to either changes in observed rates of class mobility over time within particular national societies, or differences in observed rates of class mobility among national societies’ (Goldthorpe, 2005).

As described by Joseph Schumpeter, upward and downward mobility is a result of fluidity or interchange between floors, insofar as the upward movement of lower level residents implies that others move downwards. Any changes that increase the number of high level or luxurious rooms would enable lower level residents to move upwards without anyone having to step down. Social fluidity can be achieved by individuals changing positions from lower to higher social levels and vice versa, while the structure and, hence, the positions available within each level remain stable; absolute mobility can be achieved when the analogy between levels changes.

In a more theoretical perspective, absolute mobility could be perceived simply as movement between origins and destinations or current socio-occupational positions, whereas, social fluidity or relative mobility could be defined as the relationship between class origin and current class position; it is based on the comparison between people of different class origins and the chances they have of being found in one destination class rather than another. ‘The degree of social fluidity is generally taken as an indicator of societal openness: the extent to which the chances of access to class positions are equally or unequally distributed’ (Breen, 2004, p. 4)

In any case, social mobility – either in absolute or relative terms – could be considered as an inherent process of modern democratic and competitive societies that enables in various degrees the evolution of existing socioeconomic structures and their adjustment to emerging demands and imperatives.

However, it is doubtful if social mobility could be considered by definition as a linear and progressive process that entails better positioning and equal opportunities for all; it is a rather neutral concept in the sense that it describes both upward and downward movements and opportunities not equally distributed among classes within a broader socioeconomic context (macro level) which is affected by structural changes.

1.3. Social mobility and liberal industrialism

Social mobility is a rather central issue in prevailing theories of liberal industrialism (5) due to the centrality of progressive change in their theoretical perceptions. Mobility reflects not only the degree of openness of societies but also the prospects for political action to achieve greater openness. As claimed by the theorists of industrialism, western industrial societies, based on the principals of liberalism and the open market economy, have provided much

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(5) Theoretical approach developed by several American sociologists in 1960s-1980s, Kerr, Dunlop, Parsons et al.
more possibilities for social mobility in comparison with previous (and contemporary) rather static social-economic models. Official or legally recognised class designations do not exist, and it is theoretically possible for any individual citizen to improve their social position and move from poverty and low social recognition to wealth and social prominence even within one generation. It is, nevertheless, questionable if such examples tend to be the exception rather than the rule. While a few individual members of the working class or even immigrants manage to achieve social status of high recognition or power, it is questionable if the overwhelming majority does.

Liberal industrialism is based on the assumption that in industrial societies, in comparison with pre-industrial ones:

(a) rates of social mobility are high, and upward mobility predominates over downward mobility;
(b) mobility opportunities are more equal, in the sense that individuals of differing social origins compete on more equal terms to attain (or to avoid) particular destinations;
(c) rates of mobility and the degree of equality of opportunity both tend to increase.

To justify the openness of modern societies, it is claimed that in the industrial era rapid technological developments and innovations tend to modify and increase differentiation and complexity in the structure of the division of labour. As the productive system changes, redistribution of labour among economic sectors and among an increasing range of occupations is more than imperative. Technological developments require upgrading the labour force as new methods of production raised the quality of work. Low-skilled jobs and work positions are gradually being replaced by occupations of higher qualifications improving thus the status of the labour force as a whole. High and increasing levels of mobility and openness are integral to the functioning of industrialism. At the same time, the industrial society tends to become more meritocratic as class inheritance is less important than achievement: the progressive development of the production system towards increased performance can benefit to the maximum from human resource abilities and talents. In this context education becomes a predominant factor, firstly to address the increasing needs for qualifications and secondly to promote meritocratic selection and rational distribution of labour across the occupational structure. Further, the transition towards a post-industrial society is characterised by the proportionate increase of middle class strata and, according to Bell, by the fact that knowledge has become the major resource, supplanting capital (Section 1.1); thus, theoretically opportunities for success and upward mobility are improved for all.

Remarkable structural changes that affected the class and occupational composition of contemporary western societies have actually occurred as a consequence of the proportionate expansion of the service sector and at the same time the gradual decline of jobs in the manufacturing sector. That is, transformations in the structure of the industrial economy and the gradual shift towards post-industrial patterns have considerably affected the observed rates of social mobility. More managerial, white-collar and intellectual, non-manual occupations and less manual, blue collar, unskilled jobs in the labour market characterise the
transition to post-industrial models which favours upward mobility (following Schumpeter’s illustration the expansion of the service sector has created ‘more room at the top’).

However, social mobility is not a one-sided process and structural changes can develop in many directions, which do not always fit predictions of the liberal industrialism model. Considerable increase in professional and managerial positions may also occur along with substantial increase in low-grade, low-skilled jobs. For example in Britain, since 1990 the professional and managerial salaried has continued to expand as a result of de-industrialisation, but more slowly than before; in parallel, intermediate-grade jobs often associated with the manufacturing sector have fallen off sharply, but it has also been reported that low-grade jobs have increased, especially in the service sector, with low salary, high insecurity and minimal prospects for advancement (Wolf, 2002; Goldthorpe, 2005). Deteriorating working conditions of lower qualified people may be explained by various mechanisms at play in the labour market: (a) redistribution of employment between sectors, (b) introduction of new technologies, (c) labour market substitution, (d) labour market segmentation (Cedefop, Brandsma, 2001).

In Italy, although structural changes have signed the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy (constant though slow upgrading of the occupational structure), industry still remains the widest productive sector and the working class is currently of the same size as during the 1980s. Despite the expansion of higher education qualifications, no real and stable reduction of class inequality in terms of educational opportunities has occurred. Absolute rates of mobility have remained substantially stable during the period 1985-97, with the exception of men’s upward mobility by 7%. As for relative mobility chances, the picture is more complicated (Pisati and Schizzerotto, 2004).
2. Trends in social mobility

Although liberal industrialism has captured the main features of modern industrial societies and their transition to post-industrial forms, in fact structural transformation in European countries seems to move in a more complex way which does not appear linear nor is it characterised by constant upgrading of the social structure.

Sociological research has revealed that social mobility seems to have slowed down or even reversed in spite of redistribution policies and considerable investment in education in the last decades (Goldthorpe, 2005). As for the observed rates of class mobility, the impact of structural changes seems to be more important than social fluidity effects.

Increases in social fluidity rates have in fact been observed in modern societies – in Europe and abroad – however they are still relatively small and episodic. Even if relative mobility rates were higher and social fluidity among classes increased, it would be again structural changes that would have fostered mobility rates in absolute terms. On the other hand, if increasing social fluidity rather than absolute mobility rates was the objective of a social reform agenda, then structural changes would have become less relevant. The emphasis would have to be placed on reducing the inherent dependency between original class positions and destinations.

A comparative study carried out by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) – that led to *The constant flux* – used cross-national data collected by the Casmin project, covering the period from the late 1960s till the mid-1970s. The study focused on the western and eastern European experience of social and economic growth after the Second World War. The authors particularly aimed at comparing patterns of social mobility between nine European countries: England and Wales, France, Northern Ireland, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, West Germany, Sweden, Poland and Hungary, but also to examine the experiences of Australia, Japan and the US. In combining historical and statistical analyses both of trends in mobility and of cross-national similarities and differences, the authors concluded that wide variation at the level of observed mobility coexists with a surprising degree of constancy and commonality in underlying patterns of social fluidity.

Breen (2004) examined the relationship between the class position individuals occupy and the class into which they were born. The study analyses social mobility in 10 European countries (Great Britain, France, Ireland, West Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Poland, Hungary) and Israel, based on empirical studies and data. Although there is a considerable overlap with *The constant flux* study and the authors have adopted a similar methodological approach, this study has provided findings and conclusions over the last 30 years of the 20th century, after the 1970s.

The researchers conclude that during this period countries converged in the shape of their class structure and in their patterns of social mobility. The countries studied were by the end of the 20th century more alike in their flows between class origins and destinations than they
were 30 years before. As far as inequalities between individuals from different class origins in their access to better class positions are concerned (social fluidity), no trends towards international convergence or divergence are detected. It is, however, stated that a general reduction in the strength of these inequalities is observed in several countries, most notably in France and the Netherlands. Great Britain and Germany proved, however, to be an exception: inequalities seemed to have changed little, if at all, during the reporting period.

In Germany ‘a generally greater inequality in class mobility chances’ is detected, meaning that inheritance of class positions is higher in Germany than in other countries with the exception of the service classes (I+II in EGP schema) (Muller and Pollak, 2004). Mobility barriers between the hierarchical levels of the class structure are strong, namely less social mobility or fluidity is detected. Two sets of institutions have been held responsible for the particularly high levels of ‘immobility’ in German society:

(a) the education system: less reform was carried out in Germany compared with many other countries. Early and rigid tracking in general education has led to strong vertical stratification;

(b) the labour market: status and other advantages distinguish between broad categories of manual and non-manual workers.

In France, structural transformations created ‘more room at the top’ and, consequently, affected positively absolute rates of intergenerational mobility (absolute mobility). However, their impact on relative mobility rates is unclear, as it is possible that association between class of origin and destination was rigorously preserved despite the wider access (‘more room’) to professional (higher) level occupations (Vallet, 2004).

Breen and Luijkx (2004) summarise the empirical findings and discuss issues in the development of explanatory theories of social mobility. They propose two kinds of explanation for variations in social mobility: micro-models, in which the role of education is central; and macro-models, which seek to relate mobility to features of societies as a whole such as the level of inequality and economic development. Moreover, they look at the policy implications of the results, particularly as they concern the role of the education system.

In general, conclusions drawn from the analysis of 11 countries’ data and research findings (Breen, 2004) indicate that:

(a) the trend towards convergence in class structure among the countries studied (declining significance of the farm classes, growth in the service class, decline of the manual work, particularly of the unskilled kind) has arisen along with decreasing variation between countries in their rates of overall mobility. Although European countries continue to show differences in their mobility flows, these have become less important. Absolute mobility flows converged because their main determinants did. Changes over time and variations between countries in absolute mobility flows are driven by variation in the origin and destination distributions (class distribution of men and women) rather than in social fluidity;
(b) there is a widespread tendency for social fluidity to increase; however this is not a statistically significant trend in every case. It is estimated that rates of fluidity remain rather low and in some cases constant, as an important characteristic of the upper class is the ability it gives its occupants to maintain their position (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992);

(c) rates of social fluidity would change through changes in the transmissibility of resources between generations and in the role played by particular resources (educational, cultural, material, etc.) in the attainment of class position,

(d) social mobility even as an effect of socioeconomic structural changes may also result in downward mobility, from higher grade to lower grade employment, from higher level to lower level social status;

(e) class inequality in educational attainment has declined during the reported period (1970s-late 1990s) in France, Sweden and the Netherlands, but not in Ireland or Great Britain (6). The effect of education on class destination, controlling class origins, has grown weaker over the period in France, Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden (Table 2);

(f) variations and different mechanisms through which the increase of social fluidity might be explained are observed in different countries.

Structural change is the main factor determining absolute mobility. However, it may not be less predominant to increase social fluidity. In this case, opportunities to increase the mobility potential of individuals between the class positions of parents and those of their children should be provided. The provision of educational opportunities and resources, cultural capital and income redistribution have a critical role to play.

Policy interventions in particular areas, notably those that affect equality of conditions (ascripted factors) and of opportunity, are likely to influence relative mobility in modern societies.

(6) Not all country analyses provide findings on education.
3. **Education (7) and social mobility**

Whether education comprising VET and educational policy can make a difference to social class inequalities has been widely debated in the sociology of education as well as in social mobility analysis; however, it remains, and is likely to remain, an open question which policies and measures – within a specific socioeconomic and cultural context – are adequate and effective to reverse inequalities rooted out of the education field.

The history of education in European and other western countries during the last century could be summarised as an evolutionary process from aristocratic or elite education systems (open to upper social classes) to democratic (open for all citizens) and meritocratic forms of education. Elite education systems were characterised by high levels of inequality in educational attainment and by rigid selection, whereas contemporary systems are aimed at providing universal access to all levels of education based on merit rather than ascribed factors.

Education has always been and still is subject to national policies and priorities; however, general trends and directions can be detected in the long run following similar patterns of socioeconomic development from agricultural to industrial and post-industrial societies. In the post war period (1950s onward), education was linked with policies aiming at upgrading the social status of disadvantaged groups (social policy) and/or at improving the economic performance of industrial economies (economic policies). Although emphasising different priorities, both policies addressed the need for equal opportunities and improvement of competitiveness of national economies through the expansion of educational systems.

Beside policy goals and objectives, educational sociology and research aimed at analysing the role of education in modern western societies (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Whiteside, 1978; Husen, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984, 1985; Fragoudaki, 1985; Husen et al., 1992; Berstein, 1996). Education was considered an essential mechanism that reflected existing social structures and supported reproduction of the hierarchical relations between social classes. The distributional role of education systems along with their ideological function, realised through the whole course of the education process, has been considered critical for the reproduction of certain forms of social stratification. Theoretical approaches that emphasise the critical contribution of education to social reproduction and underline its conservative rather than transformative role perceive education in a rather static way; they underestimate the fact that education systems operate within ever-changing socioeconomic structures and they often neglect the inherent tendency of modern industrial societies to renovate at all levels. As claimed by the theorists of liberal industrialism, technological development calls for continuous change in the structure of the social division of labour. The growing demand for highly qualified personnel favours the expansion of education and training and also the reform of educational institutions to allow access for individuals of all social backgrounds.

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(7) VET is particularly treated in Section 4.
In another theoretical perspective (post-war egalitarianism), education was considered a channel through which social transformations could be implemented. Within this context, the egalitarian theories and policies also aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens and attempted by means of educational reform to redefine social stratification in less discriminating forms. Educational reforms and certain policy measures were expected to create a society of equal opportunities for all in improving their social status and position (education as a instrument of social policy).

Both the macrosocial-reproduction role of education through ideological and distributional means and the micro level social mobility that is promoted through education could be used to analyse different functions of education systems.

The fact that educational institutions reproduce the fundamental structural elements of socioeconomic systems does not prevent or prohibit mobility of individuals. Education is not a process that ends up with predetermined results; it is affected by endogenous and exogenous factors that, under certain circumstances, induce and enable higher or lower rates of social fluidity.

3.1. Origin, education and destination (OED)

The association of education with social mobility can be described in a simple scheme, often adopted by sociologists, the OED triangle. It is actually a model that aims to illustrate the association between class origin and educational attainment (path A) and, the effect of education on class and occupational destination (path B). Education stands for the major factor that mediates social fluidity, mobility between classes. The A+B association reflects the intermediating role of education between class origin and destination. Path C is the direct origin/destination association that is not mediated by education.

**Figure 1:** The OED triangle – origins, education and destinations

It would be expected that social fluidity (mobility in relative terms) would increase (a) if the class origin/education association weakened, if educational attainment was not affected by class origin effects and equal opportunities were achieved for all, and (b) if the education/class destination association turned out to be stronger, namely if the importance of
achievement and educational qualifications (merit) were come to be the most critical factors for labour-market entry and professional development.

As for the direct association between origin and destination, which is mediated by other factors relevant to socioeconomic conditions and transformations (macro level), any significant increase in social fluidity would be expected to result in increased rates of absolute mobility. However, as shown in Section 2, this is not actually the case; the role of education may be less important than is often meant and social fluidity mediated by education ‘plays a minor role when compared with the direct partial effects from origin to destination’ (Breen and Luijkx, 2004).

While class inequality in educational attainment has declined during the last 30 years of the 20th century in several European countries, the influence of education on class destination, controlling class origins, has grown weaker (Breen and Luijkx, 2004).

Table 2: Inequalities in educational attainment – trends and variations (reporting period: 1970-2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Research findings</th>
<th>OED association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>• class inequality in educational attainment has declined;</td>
<td>• origin to education association (path A) has weakened;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the impact of education on class destination has become weaker;</td>
<td>• education to class destination association (path B) has weakened;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• compositional effect deriving from an interaction between origins, destinations and education.</td>
<td>• origin to destination association (path C) is weaker among people in higher educational categories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>• class inequality in educational attainment has declined;</td>
<td>• origin to education association (path A) has weakened;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the impact of education on class destination has become weaker.</td>
<td>• education to class destination association (path B) has weakened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• class inequality in educational attainment has declined;</td>
<td>• origin to education (path A) association has weakened;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the impact of education on class destination has become weaker.</td>
<td>• education to class destination (path B) association has weakened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland, G. Britain</td>
<td>• no significant changes in class inequalities in educational attainment;</td>
<td>• origin to education association (path A) rather constant;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• education to class destination (path B) association has weakened.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Studies and comparative research on the influence of class origin on children’s educational achievements have demonstrated that the association between social origin and educational opportunities is still strong, despite educational reforms that have tended to provide equal opportunities for all; it seems that there are other significant factors affecting the origin/destination association apart from education per se and they have quite a critical role to play.

### 3.2. Social origin and educational attainment

Both orientation through the course of the educational process and school attainment are affected to a considerable extent by social origin factors. Educational achievement operates as a screening criterion to track pupils into general/academic or vocational pathways. The following factors influence success, failure or tracking of pupils (Grelet, 2004):

1. **achievement in primary and secondary education (educational attainment):** low grades are usually a strong disadvantage for pupils to continue in general education. However, educational attainment is also subject to social origin, social environment and family status influences, even in cases where they are not the most decisive. Social origin effects are even more influential when separation between different educational tracks takes place at an early stage (Section 4 about VET and early tracking);

2. **families’ expectations:** families/parents who set higher goals for their children are more likely to support their aspirations and encourage their children towards higher levels of education and more prestigious educational tracks. Privileged families have proved to be more able to guide their children and help them stick as long as possible to general educational orientations;

#### Germany

- the impact of education on class destination has become weaker;
- the partial (extra-educational) effects of origins on destinations remain constant.
- no significant changes in class inequalities in educational attainment;
- the impact of education on class destination has remained constant.

B) association has weakened;
- origin to destination (path C) association remains constant.
- origin to education association (path A) rather constant;
- education to class destination (path B) association remains constant.

**Source:** Breen, 2004.
(c) social/occupational background: different types of expectations may be observed among some socio-occupational categories whose occupational identity is very strong and provide inheritance models, for example farmers, craftsmen;

(d) attitude towards learning shaped by the family environment: some children are more keen on learning and keep on higher education levels not merely due to abilities but mainly because their family environment is more favourable to educational, cultural and learning activities. Parents’ positive attitude towards learning and educational background influence children’s orientation towards general or vocational education. Family’s educational level has proved to be an important factor of intergenerational inheritance. Educated parents are more likely to help children’s upwards mobility;

(e) gender has been a key parameter of educational orientation. In spite of the fact that, in the past, gender discrimination against females had negatively affected their access to and progression through the education system, nowadays women have proved to have increased access to higher education levels and better educational attainment than their male counterparts. However, it’s been detected that gender still affects orientation towards specialisations, particularly in vocational training; certain fields of studies and training specialisations that lead to less attractive and promising occupations are still a female choice, whereas there are still some specialisations considered a male choice.

Given the important influence of family background, the critical question is whether, to what extent and how education can intervene to reverse class inheritance (learning attitude, perceptions) and if this can happen when pupils have entered education, and particularly when they have reached secondary levels, either general or vocational. Is pupils’ identity and orientation already established when they have completed compulsory education and, thus, their future social identity (social class/status) is an irreversible situation? Is it more likely to reverse social and cultural inheritance when pupils are still at the primary level of education when there is still room for intervention? No definite answer is provided by research findings and observation, in spite of the fact that pupils’ social backgrounds and personal characteristics are both considered as critical factors (8).

On the other hand, there is evidence that alteration of social inheritance effects as well as development of personal characteristics can be achieved. Apart from sociological research, pedagogical theories and research have discussed the reproduction of social inheritance through pedagogy and how education can achieve integration of youngsters into occupational and social positions rather different from that of their parents (Berstein, 1996; 2000; Rose, 2004; Morais, 2002; see also Hoadley, 2006). In other words, social background and cultural influences are critical factors, however not decisive for social mobility. In any case, it is necessary to underline once again that education is likely to provide opportunities, create

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(8) Jean Piaget (1896-1980) claimed that inheritance and social environment are not the major factors affecting children’s intellectual development, which is rather a result of biological influences on how we come to know. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) looked more to social interaction as the primary source of cognition and behaviour.
chances and open ways ahead, but is not the only or even the most important factor to affect social mobility. It would be more accurate to say that education – under certain prerequisites and socioeconomic conditions – is likely to increase the relative mobility opportunities of less privileged classes and improve the absolute rates of social mobility in a given society.

3.2.1. Case studies: social origin/education association (9)

McIntosh and Munk (2004) examine the role of class origin effects (family background variables) in the determination of educational achievements. Parents’ education and occupation along with an indicator of ability – as represented by a set of intelligence tests – explain a modest but significant portion of the variation in children’s educational achievements. As for the variation in the probabilities of attaining a certain level of education, research illustrates that family background variables rather than ability as measured by educational tests are more important. Ability is shown to be more general than that reflected in intelligence tests results as unobservable elements significantly affect variations across educational outcomes. The research was based on a sample of Danish students who were at the age of 14 in 1968 and who participated in the 1968 Danish longitudinal survey of youth. At that time Denmark had already established an advanced welfare state with free and universal access to all levels of schooling; it seems unlikely that students were constrained by the level of availability of educational opportunities and, consequently, it is reasonable to expect that ability and not family background variables would determine educational attainment. The research results have shown that was not actually the case (Table 3).

The research methodology implemented the family capital model comprising family’s background variables, for example parents’ educational background and qualifications, parents’ occupation, social class. The basic idea behind this model is that capital is accumulated and produced during an individual’s life, particularly during childhood and is determined by the characteristics of the family in which individuals grow up. The researchers followed the tradition of Blau and Duncan (1978), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Bowles et al. (2001) to specify which variables are the most important in determining educational attainment.

The research outcomes are summarised as follows:

(a) family background variables are more important in explaining the final level of education attainment than are a set of intelligence test scores administered at age 14; academic ability matters in educational attainment, especially gaining an university degree, but family background in general is much more important when it comes to attaining education;

(b) women’s performance is determined by different variables than those affecting success of men;

(9) This section is mainly based on the following studies: McIntosh and Munk, 2004; Paterson and Iannelli, 2005a and 2005b.
(c) unobservable effects which are often attributed to ability are present even when test scores are included as covariates suggesting that there are other non-intelligence dimensions to ability that matter in educational success.

Further, as far as academic or VET tracks are concerned, parents’ school education and father’s occupation have a considerable impact on the probability of attaining a vocational education or a college/university degree. Higher household income also matters particularly for males, while females are affected by being in larger families and experiencing household disruptions like the divorce of their parents.

All these types of variables can be seen as measuring different aspects of family capital. Additionally, the researchers conclude that these results are probably due to the unequal accumulation of capital in families, which influences success in the Danish educational system.

The research undertaken by McIntosh and Munk (2004) has shown that education as an intermediating factor is possible to affect considerably the class origin/destination link; however, even where certain measures and policies are promoted and educational reforms (universal access to all levels of education, expansion of compulsory education, increase of school leaving age, etc.) are successful in weakening the link between class origin and educational attainment, there are still several factors (social exclusion, poverty, cultural background, regional inequalities) that influence pupils’ academic ability and educational achievements (10).

Other researchers (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) have described the influence of social origin and family background in similar terms, such as parental cultural capital to demonstrate attitudes towards learning, aspirations, goals and expectations induced by parents and parental wealth and income, namely family’s economic abilities (Green et al., 2003). Most studies have shown that both factors are relevant and may be important in the early stages of children’s life (early socialisation) that partly determines future cognitive performance (and thus educational achievements). However, other inheritance effects in later years of schooling may also be important in determining academic success or failure.

As Boudon (2001) argued with his ‘positioning theory’, pupils’ choices may be strongly

(10) Following the cultural capital argument, Espring-Andersen argues that low level of cultural capital amongst parents can reduce children’s educational achievement through lower levels of cognitive stimulation in the early years; through failure to pass on the cultural codes which are valued in schools; through less parental ability to navigate school systems to the benefit of the child; and through making children more risk-averse in relation to future educational decisions. Universal childcare in Sweden, says Espring-Andersen, counteracts this by providing supplementary socialisation in culturally mixed environments. The importance of income and wealth differences is not ruled out, and may still explain part of the social inheritance effect, but it is the inequalities in cultural endowment between parents, he implies, which is most important and which, therefore, should be the main target of reforms, rather than school systems which may make very little difference to cognitive inequalities once early socialisation has had its effects’ (Green et al., 2003).
affected, apart from factors related to culture and income, by positional factors. ‘Middle-class children may have more to lose in purchasing non-academic routes which are likely to lead to downward mobility than working class children for whom choosing a non-academic route will possibly lead to social class maintenance. Regardless of cognitive ability, children from lower social backgrounds will perceive higher positional risks in following academic routes, not only because of fear of failing but also concern that success may entail costs’ (Green et al., 2003), such as investment in education, opportunity cost, etc.

Within the same context of social origin/destination association, the study undertaken by Iannelli and Paterson (2005b) aimed to investigate how educational attainment is affected by class origin effects and analyse the role played by education in the process of intergenerational social mobility. Although the researchers were particularly interested in Scotland, the research outcomes are valid for a more general analysis of trends in social mobility and its relation to education. The study is particularly interesting as the education system in Scotland has developed towards more comprehensive patterns of schooling and educational participation is relatively high. Thus, barriers to educational attainment seem to have relatively reduced.

The results have shown that, although educational attainment has increased overall, the association between social origin and educational attainment has not significantly changed over time. The only changes were found in the case of women and in relation to different types of tertiary qualifications (subdegree and degree) and this was because, as the researchers explained, changes in the non-university sector (expansion and increased proportions of degrees awarded) were likely to have affected women more than men. Women of all classes benefited more from the introduction of comprehensive secondary education and so working-class girls benefited more from the comprehensive reform than working-class boys.

There is no evidence to support that meritocracy is dominant in modern societies; whereas service class employment has grown to embrace around 40 % of the population (in Scotland), it is still not the case that meritocratic recruitment dominates primarily determined by acquired educational credentials. The direct influence of origin has started to become more important again, after a post-war interval during which educational qualifications seemed to be the way for middle-class children toward middle-class jobs. The role of education may be still strong, however it’s not getting stronger, and may be falling.

Further to the aforementioned research findings, Paterson and Iannelli (2005b) examine variations among England, Wales and Scotland in the association between social origin and educational attainment. They consider the role that different national policies may have played in affecting these variations. As the two researchers report, the results illustrate that country variations in the association was mostly or entirely due to variations in the overall levels of attainment. Country differences in educational policy have not yielded different changes over time in the association between origin and educational attainment. The analysis has put emphasis on policy measures and reforms implemented in the three education systems.
particularly through the second half of the last century – rather than on structural changes – as factors affecting relative class inequalities in educational attainment and social mobility rates.

As stated in the paper (Paterson and Iannelli, 2005b, p. 2), ‘there has been a general tendency to conclude from research into educational expansion in Europe and North America in the past half century that, in most places and most times, educational policy has contributed relatively little, if anything, to reducing social inequalities’ Paterson and Iannelli (2005). Reductions in relative educational inequalities have come about because of much wider programmes of social democratic reform, notably in Scandinavian countries. Raising the overall level of participation and attainment is also a policy mechanism often used by policy-makers to reduce education inequalities, when they are not able to engage in large-scale social reform. Although the aim of educational policy has often been to change the association between class origin and attainment, the researchers assume that in a general sense this is not directly under the influence of policy-makers.

The research findings, although not definitive, tend to confirm that education cannot be used, on its own, to eliminate social inequalities and counteract decisive factors such as effective social networks, self-confident aspirations and wealth. Although the class origin/education association could possibly be affected by certain policies, there are other factors such as family capital that appear highly influential in defining the origin/destination association. If the question is how to reduce social inheritance, we could suppose that a set of policy measures and objectives should be designed rather than fragmented changes in education systems alone.

Table 3: Social origin and educational attainment – case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Research approach</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Denmark   | Educational attainment in association with family capital comprising family’s background variables: parents’ educational background and qualifications, parents’ occupation and social class (Mackintosh and Munk, 2004). | • family background variables are more important in explaining the final level of education attainment than a set of intelligence test scores; academic ability matters in educational attainment, especially gaining an university degree, but family background in general is much more important when it comes to attaining education;  
• unobservable effects, which are often attributed to ability, are present even when test scores are included as covariates suggesting that there are other non-intelligence dimensions to ability that matter in educational success;  
• women’s performance is determined by different variables than those affecting success of men. Higher household income matters particularly for |
males, while females are affected by being in larger families and experiencing household disruptions like the divorce of their parents;

- parents’ school education and father’s occupation have a considerable impact on the probability of attaining a vocational education or a college/university degree;

- even if certain policies are successful in weakening the link between class origin and educational attainment, there are still several factors (e.g. social exclusion, poverty, cultural background, regional inequalities) that influence the pupils’ academic ability and educational achievements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Educational attainment in association with class origin influences; the role played by education in the process of intergenerational social mobility (Iannelli and Paterson, 2005b).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• although educational attainment has increased overall, the association between social origin and educational attainment has not significantly changed over time;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• changes were detected in the case of women, as expansion of the non-university sector (i.e. expansion and increased proportions of degrees awarded) were likely to have affected women more than men;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• women of all classes benefited more from the introduction of comprehensive secondary education; working-class girls benefited more from the comprehensive reform than working-class boys;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the direct influence of origin has started to become more important again, after a post-war interval during which educational qualifications seemed to be the way for middle-class children toward middle-class jobs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>England, Wales and Scotland</th>
<th>Comparative study: variations in the association between social origin and educational attainment; the role that different national</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• country variations in the association were mostly or entirely due to variations in the overall levels of attainment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• country differences in educational policy have not yielded different changes over time in the association between origin and educational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
policies may have played in affecting these variations (Paterson and Iannelli, 2005b).

- education cannot be used, on its own, to eliminate social inequalities and counteract decisive factors such as effective social networks, self-confident aspirations and wealth;
- other factors such as family capital appear highly influential in defining the origin-destination association;
- reductions in relative educational inequalities have come about because of much wider programmes of social democratic reform.

| France |  
|---|---|
| The orientation process towards vocational tracks and specific occupations: major influential factors. The analysis mainly concentrated on those pupils who had followed a vocational track (Grelet, 2004). |  
- orientation towards a vocational track is a complex process influenced by several factors. Educational attainment has a decisive role to play, but it does not completely account for social discrimination;
- families’ aspirations, determined by the parental occupational and educational background, may reinforce or weaken the effect of social origin;
- evidence of strong tendencies governing the allocation of specialisations and occupational positions of young people depending on their social and geographical origin;
- the role of gender is significant, but rather weak: if female students are less likely to enter vocational tracks, it is mostly due to their better level of achievement. |

Sources: McIntosh and Munk, 2004; Paterson and Iannelli, 2005a and 2005b; Grelet, 2004.

As discussed briefly up till now, there are many factors which contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities and particularities through education systems inhibiting, thus, both upwards and downwards social mobility. Social origin, family’s social background and position, cultural capital and income, strong occupational roots and geographical limitations. However, social inequalities and lack of equal opportunities originate from individuals’ socioeconomic environment and not from education per se. There is no doubt that the education system is an essential factor which, at macro level, contributes to reproduction of the socioeconomic system and, consequently, of the social stratification by ideological and
distributional means. It is also obvious that any attempt to discuss the social role of education and approach the socioeconomic environment from a static point of view would inevitably lead to dogmatic conclusions far from evolving reality in contemporary western societies. Neither socioeconomic systems, nor education systems are static and polarised; they are rather complicated and dynamic, flexible and open to internal adaptation and changes. Despite social mobility being influenced by socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds rather than meritocratic factors, education may still contribute to social fluidity, improving relative chances of mobility across class and occupational structures. The programme for international student assessment (PISA 2000 and 2003) research findings have shown that although social background factors exert a powerful influence on student performance, education systems have an essential role to play in compensating inequalities and improve the social mobility potential of less advantaged students (OECD, 2004). The extent to which such mobility (fluidity) occurs is subject to internal (education policies) and external (structural social changes, production system and labour market developments, etc.) interrelated parameters and variables.

The VET sector has a particular role to play in mediating social stratification and in providing opportunities for mobility. We have to underline that VET and its relation to social stratification and mobility issues should be discussed in a dynamic and evolutionary context. VET has been put through various reforms and transformations; moreover, VET systems have undergone various implementations at national level and different traditions and learning patrimonies have determined their contemporary roles.
4. Vocational education and training: social stratification and mobility

There are several approaches to vocational education and various implementations of VET \(^{(11)}\) systems, which reflect the national environment, socioeconomic particularities, the institutional role of education and policy goals/priorities in each country. Although VET systems are different in their structures, methods and institutional arrangements, nowadays, they seem to converge in defining common objectives, targets and priorities to improve the quality of human capital and reinforce the competitiveness of the European economy at global level (see the Lisbon strategy 2010 and the process of enhanced cooperation in VET initiated in Copenhagen in 2002) \(^{(12)}\).

Within the context of education systems, traditionally vocational/technical education and training is meant to develop knowledge and practical skills, namely skills which lead to occupations concerned with the implementation/execution of practical and technical tasks. The norms and models of the early industrial era related VET (mainly in the form of apprenticeship) with manual labour and occupations in the manufacturing sector (labour-intensive occupations), despite the population of unskilled manual workers being then quite large.

VET prepares learners for careers or professions that are traditionally non-academic and directly related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation in which the learner participates. It is sometimes referred to as technical education, as the learner directly specialises in a particular technique of using technology.

VET is usually opposed to education in a broader scientific field, characteristic of tertiary education, which concentrates on theory and abstract conceptual knowledge. In this contribution, we will distinguish VET into (a) vocational education at upper secondary level that in many EU countries provides access to skilled jobs and tertiary education (even at university level) in many countries and (b) vocational training which corresponds to more narrow qualification pathways providing specific job-related training.

To examine VET in the context of social mobility issues and particularly how VET might affect social mobility – notably the relative chances of occupational achievement for children of diverse origins – we have to consider the different opportunities and perspectives that both vocational education and vocational training are likely to offer youngsters in accessing the

\(^{(11)}\) Vocational education is the ‘education, the objective of which is to prepare the student/pupil for a particular vocation or type of vocation and the content of which is planned or designed to achieve that purpose’ (Cedefop, 1996, p. 55).

\(^{(12)}\) Vocational training is the ‘activity or programme of activities designed to teach the skills and knowledge required for particular kinds of work’ (Cedefop, 1996, p. 52).
Vocational education and vocational training, though complementary pathways within the wider field of vocational/technical education, may be distinct in their learning objectives, curricula and methods. Vocational education provides more general knowledge and skills and is oriented towards broad occupational fields, whereas vocational training (short and long term) is usually related to specific knowledge and skills addressing the needs and characteristics of specific jobs or narrow occupational fields. Besides, vocational education mostly takes place in schools whereas vocational training in companies in the form of apprenticeship; the dual system as implemented, for example, in Germany comprises both general knowledge and job-specific skills acquisition.

The general nature and contents of vocational education is possible to influence future progression in the labour market (job placement) in a much different way than the specific job-related skill provision of vocational training. Recent studies have shown that academic education and general vocational tracks are more likely to achieve good job placement and career perspectives, whereas vocational training is less promising (Wolf, 2002; Svetlik, 2004; Kanellopoulos, 2006).

Going back to the OED triangle (Section 3.1) exemplifying the class origin effect on education and the education/destination association, we will examine how VET is related to social origin and, further, how VET is likely to affect the social destination, namely how VET mediates social mobility and how VET intervenes to provide opportunities for better prospects in the labour market.

### 4.1. General/vocational: a hierarchical relation

The distinction between general education and VET, which is reflected in the dichotomic structure of secondary school education (general/vocational) and in distinct educational routes, has derived from various factors – as aforementioned – implicitly and explicitly related to particular socioeconomic conditions and the distributional role of education systems. In other words general/vocational separation is a projection of the distinction and, moreover, the hierarchical relation between theory and practice. The origin of this distinction is to be found in the foundations of socioeconomic models and in prevailing hierarchical patterns of labour division in industrial and pre-industrial societies.

This rigid distinction between theory and practice can explain in a schematic way the widespread perception that theoretical/general education is superior to vocational/technical education. Based on this hierarchical structure, the dual or selective, as widely known, education system in its pure form – that used to be the dominant educational paradigm for a long time – has contributed to the reproduction of an occupational hierarchy, namely

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(13) There is actually a grading of schooling pathways, which varies depending on the national secondary education system and a lot of heterogeneity within each track.
occupations of higher and lower status. However, the basic distributional function of education systems is implemented through distinctive educational pathways and selection that takes place mostly at the upper secondary level of education (also in lower secondary education).

The historical evolution of industrial societies and the transition to post-industrial socioeconomic models has initiated significant changes in VET systems. The range of occupations has considerably changed, while various intermediate occupations have emerged between manual and intellectual jobs. At the same time, the scale of occupations, ranging from low-level, low-skilled manual workers to high-level managers and intellectual workers, has expanded to include several intermediate, middle-class positions that require general knowledge as well as practical/technical skills affecting, consequently, traditional class typologies and rigid demarcations in class stratification.

The previous section examined the role of education as an intermediating factor between class origin and destination. It was noted that educational attainment is influenced by social inheritance effects; relative chances for social mobility are increased as long as the origin/education association becomes weaker and class inheritance effects diminish. Although VET is part of the education system in its broader purpose, it should also be analysed in its particularity.

VET being a separate educational pathway has often been conceived (de facto) as a choice or educational orientation that leads pupils towards lower and intermediate destinations in the occupational structure. ‘The attractiveness of vocational education depends to a large extent on its social standing and the opportunities it offers in the labour market in terms of employment, pay, career prospects and actual jobs’ (Cedefop, Lasonen and Manning, 2001). Nevertheless, it should not be neglected that contemporary VET systems may also lead to higher education routes and, thus, high-level occupational positions.

Selective education systems tend to generate roughly speaking two different groups of students: those who come through secondary schooling in general education track, where they can expect to reach higher education levels (higher education, academic or technological), and those who are oriented towards the vocational track, which grants them faster entry into the labour market. Does this allocation of pupils among different educational routes reflect the strong influence of their social background rather than their preferences and capacities? Does the social and occupational background of their parents induce their selection of educational and occupational orientation? Is the origin effect stronger in VET than in academic educational tracks?

If it is accepted that VET mainly attracts pupils from less advantaged classes with low and intermediate occupational position, it is thus more likely that VET tracks reproduce rather than reduce pre-existing social inequalities and discriminations.

Grelet (2004), in her research paper on *Vocational education, training specialisation and social reproduction*, examines the orientation process towards vocational tracks and more
precisely towards a specific occupation, which evidently impacts the future occupational position and she concludes that ‘theses mechanisms are at the heart of social reproduction and social mobility’. The research used panel data of pupils enrolled in secondary level during 1995-96 collected by the French Ministry of Education. The generation 98 longitudinal school leavers’ survey (conducted by Céreq (14)) data were also used and analysed to support the research work (Box 3). The analysis mainly concentrated on those pupils who had followed a vocational track. In France, 38% of all secondary level students are manual workers’ children; this percentage rises to 54% in the vocational track (vocational secondary schools), while the remaining 46% originate from other socio-occupational categories (source: Ministry of Education, 2002-03).

**Box 3: National datasets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French Ministry of Education: panel data of pupils enrolled in secondary education during 1995-96</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aim:</strong> data gathering from the beginning of secondary cycle, to track the progression of pupils throughout the secondary level and feed research and studies on relevant issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Variables collected:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(a) type of school (year after year);</td>
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<td>(b) family’s background (occupation, level of education, etc.);</td>
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<tr>
<td>(c) parents’ aspirations and expectations from their children’s educational attainment;</td>
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<tr>
<td>(d) educational orientation and track (general/vocational or other internal specialisation);</td>
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<tr>
<td>(e) future educational and occupational plans (information collected by questionnaire in Spring 2002).</td>
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</table>

The study of Grelet (2004) was based on 13 120 questionnaires filled in by pupils who had followed vocational tracks.

**Generation 98 longitudinal school leavers’ survey**

Description: Generation 98, 750 000 pupils or apprentices who left initial education at all levels and in all training specialisations.

Method: 55 000 interviews with youngsters belonging to Generation 98. The study focused on those who completed vocational high school or apprenticeship at the second level of education and were employed at the time of the survey (2001).

(14) Céreq is a public body under the aegis of the Ministry of National Education, High Education and Research and the Ministry of Employment, Works and Social Cohesion. As a public centre of expertise at the service of key players in training and employment, Céreq is involved both at once in the production of statistics, research and the accompaniment of actions. It provides advice and proposals intended to clarify choices in training policy at regional, national or international levels.
Interviewees were asked to provide information about their schooling pathway and describe their successive jobs and employers. The analysis of results aimed at depicting the links, which relate training specialisation to social and geographical origins; additionally, at illustrating the links of educational, social, environmental backgrounds with occupational destination (job placement).

Results (in brief) regarding mobility between parental occupational status and successor’s occupational destination:
(a) strong association between specialisation and occupational status of father; farm owners’ children appear to be the most engaged in an inheritance process and mostly attracted by their fathers’ occupational activity;
(b) father’s occupation affects children’s vocational specialisation, which leads to a specific occupational destination;
(c) the survey reveals an existing localised mechanism of social reproduction, however it only shows trends and not absolute determinism.

The future analysis of panel data 95 concerning occupational careers is expected to provide a clear picture of the interrelation between educational tracks and occupational positions illustrating the influence of VET on social mobility.

The study illustrates that in France schooling performances are not the only sorting criterion for the allocation of students in the vocational track, and that social stratification plays a role in this process, reinforced by spatial stratification. Orientation towards a vocational track is a complex process influenced by several factors. Educational attainment has a decisive role to play, but it does not completely account for social discrimination. Families’ aspirations, determined by the parental occupational and educational background, may reinforce or weaken the effect of social origin. As for the choice of a specific occupational field, social reproduction is evident in definite socioeconomic spaces as documented by the association between youngsters’ background and destination. However, as underlined, this strong association ‘does not prove determinism, it only shows evidence of strong tendencies governing the allocation of specialisations and occupational positions of young people depending on their social and geographical origin’ (Grelet, 2004, p. 11). The role of gender is significant, but rather weak: if female students are less likely to enter vocational tracks, it is mostly due to their better level of achievement.

The findings have also shown that a significant part of respondents would have changed their educational track – towards tertiary occupations – and field of specialisation, if they had the chance to redefine their orientation. It is reported that their choice was dictated by low-level achievements (test scores) having been directed unwillingly towards a specialisation they did not decide on.

From the latter, one could conclude that early or premature selection is more open to social inheritance effects, dictated either by direct parental influence or by low educational achievements that may also be subject to family background variables (see previous section).
4.2. Comprehensive versus selective

Traditional strategies to reduce social inheritance effects on education have promoted policies aiming to avoid early tracking and promote comprehensive schooling against selection. The comprehensive reforms proved to have weak and strong points; moreover, they have illustrated the limits of educational policies to handle inequalities that find their origins outside the education system.

4.2.1. The British comprehensive reform

British school education was based for a long time on selective systems and curricula. The tripartite system could be an example to demonstrate how social segregation may be reproduced through selective education systems, through a rigid segregation between general and vocational/technical tracks.

The tripartite system, widely known as the ‘grammar school system’, was the structure by which Britain’s secondary education was organised between 1944 and 1976. The post-war education system was based on a selective approach which entailed distinct educational orientations. Secondary schools were divided into three categories, grammar schools, technical schools and modern schools. Selection took place by means of a competitive examination, the 11+ examination at the age of 11+, after completion of primary education.

Grammar schools had a strong academic reputation and were also quite selective (up to 10% of pupils’ population) preparing for tertiary education. Grammar schools often performed well in ranking tables, and there was a high level of competition for places.

Technical schools were meant to teach mechanical, scientific and engineering skills to serve industry and science, however only a few were finally operated.

Modern schools were supposed to provide technical skills for specific crafts and trades. They provided for the majority of 11+ pupils leaving at the minimum school-leaving age of 15. Modern schools offered basic education preparing pupils for relatively low-level manual jobs. In practice the secondary modern school came to be seen as the school for failures. Those who had failed their 11+ and were thought unsuitable for either an academic curriculum or a technical one were sent to secondary modern, where they received training in simple, practical skills before advancing to low-skilled jobs.

Due to the strong association between pupils’ class origin and educational achievements, modern schools attracted pupils who originated from less favoured and unprivileged social groups having, thus, less possibilities to succeed in 11+ examinations.

The tripartite system has been criticised as it contributed to the reproduction of class
inequalities in educational attainment. Heath and Jacobs (1999, CREST (15)) analyse the introduction of comprehensive schooling (1960) and examine whether it succeeded to reduce class inequalities, provide equal opportunities and achieve better educational achievements in comparison with the tripartite era (16).

To examine the impact of comprehensive reform the two researchers used the British household panel survey (BHPS) data. BHPS is a longitudinal survey of private households in Britain. More than 10 000 adult (16+) interviews were used out of a representative sample of over 5 000 households (initial wave in 1991) and the aim was to re-interview them annually. The BHPS contained information on the type of school the respondent attended, the social/occupational position of their father (or mother) and their highest educational qualification.

The research and data analysis was based on the definition of seven birth cohorts: 1900-19, 1920-29, 1930-39, 1940-49, 1950-59, 1960-69, 1970-79 each one educated in certain education systems. The first two birth cohorts received all their education in a system that resembled the post-war tripartite arrangements. The 1930-39 birth cohort was a transitional one, while the 1940-49 cohort was educated in the tripartite system during the post-war years. The 1950-59 cohort was again a transitional one, while the two latter birth cohorts were educated under the comprehensive system.

4.2.1.1. Growth in qualifications

The research results underline that during the 20th century the proportion of formal educational qualifications has dramatically risen in Britain, as in other western European countries. In the earliest birth cohort (1900-19) 80 % of the male and approximately 90 % of the female population had none of these formal educational credentials (school or university qualifications), whereas in the most recent cohort (1970-79) the percentage of unqualified had been decreased for both men and women to approximately 10 %. It is noted that the most significant absolute increase concerned the ‘acquisition of the intermediate qualifications such as O level, where women made rather larger gains than men’ (Heath and Jacobs, 1999, p. 12). The growth of qualifications is the most notable change during the 20th century; however, as the researchers have underlined, the rise had started before the comprehensive reform and, consequently, it is doubtful if and how much role has the transformation of the selective system played in that notable growth of educational qualifications.

Table 4: % of men obtaining O level or above at different types of schools

|-------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|

(15) The Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends is an ESRC Research Centre based jointly at the National Centre for Social Research and the Department of Sociology, University of Oxford.

(16) About reforms in the British education system, see also Preston and Green in this volume.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary/secondary modern</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical and other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>All</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
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</table>


Table 5: % of women obtaining O level or above at different types of schools

During the second part of the period covered by the youngest cohorts (1940-79), the association between school type and examination success became much weaker, namely comprehensive and secondary modern schools had been catching up with selective ones, whilst secondary modern schools were making similar absolute progress in educational achievements to comprehensive ones. In the youngest cohort, the differences in learning opportunities, for example in the chances of acquiring at least O level, had narrowed very substantially. Heath and Jacobs conclude that these results and variations ‘were largely due to autonomous social processes and would have occurred even in the absence of comprehensive reorganisation’. Similar results concerning educational expansion and the growth of qualifications occurred in Northern Ireland as well, where comprehensive reform did not take place. The introduction of the certificate of secondary education, which catered for the ‘less
academic members of the age group’ and gave them the chance to acquire ‘a qualification with real value in the labour market’ and the raising of the school-leaving age (up to 16) are considered more influential changes than the comprehensive reform per se. However, the establishment of comprehensive schools did provide access to higher qualifications for pupils who had been excluded under the selective school system contributing, thus, to alteration of the social composition of the secondary education level (Heath and Jacobs, 1999, p. 15).

4.2.1.2. Class inequalities in education – relative mobility

The tripartite system has been often criticised to favour children from middle and upper class origin in accessing grammar schools. Since access to grammar school and consequently to higher education was significantly influenced by social factors such as origin, family’s cultural and educational background, parents’ occupational position, type of primary school, neighbourhood or geographical location, etc., pupils under the tripartite system were allocated into different types of schools according to their class origin; in other words, under the tripartite system the association between class origin and education was particularly strong.

To explore questions of social background in relation to the comprehensive reform, the authors have adopted a short version of the EGP class schema (Section 1.1.1).

The classification included three broad categories:

(a) the salaried(?), namely relatively secure and advantage positions in the professions and management;

(b) the intermediate classes, namely routine white collar workers, petty bourgeoisie, foremen and technicians;

(c) the working class, manual workers in industry, services and agriculture.

To investigate class inequalities in education, under the tripartite system and after the comprehensive reorganisation, they correlated the different types of schools and the representation of the three broad categories in each type across the birth cohorts.

Table 6: % of men from salaried origins at the different types of school

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<td>33</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>64</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary/secondary</td>
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</table>
As illustrated in the tables above private and grammar schools have a much higher percentage of pupils coming from the salaried class, whereas pupils from salaried have been underrepresented at elementary and secondary modern schools; this trend has slightly changed across the birth cohorts.

It is noteworthy that the social composition of comprehensive schools at the early stage (1940-49 cohort) was disproportionate as a low percentage (9% of men and 15% of women) of pupils originating from the salaried compared with the overall percentage of 19% (men and women) for that cohort in general. In subsequent stages, when the comprehensive reorganisation matured, the figures show a balanced representation of salaried in comprehensives as a whole (31% of men and 35% of women compared to the overall percentage of 30% men and women for the 1970-79 cohort in general) meaning that they had achieved their main goal of educating a representative cross-section of the population. However, as the researchers underline, ‘this does not mean that individual comprehensive schools would have educated a representative cross-section since there is very considerable residential and hence social selection in access to individual schools’ (Heath and Jacobs,

### Table 7: % of women from salaried origins at the different types of school

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<tr>
<td>Private</td>
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<td>61</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>35</td>
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<td>Elementary/secondary modern</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical and other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
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<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Heath and Jacobs, 1999.*
Moreover, the results have shown that there has been little change across the birth cohorts in the association between class origin and school type.

Although the relationship between type of school and success in achieving at least O level has remarkably weakened across the birth cohorts, the distribution of opportunities among classes in accessing the different types of schools have not significantly changed over the period; it has remained rather constant.

What about the relationship between class origin and success in achieving intermediate qualifications? The term relative class inequality was adopted to estimate the degree of opportunities that different classes achieve in their competition to secure educational qualifications. Odds ratios comparing the relative success (in obtaining intermediate qualifications) of children from salaried and working class origin were considered to address the issue. While the absolute gap between working-class and salaried pupils in educational achievements (intermediate qualifications) have fallen – the percentage of working class pupils in achieving intermediate qualifications across the birth cohorts has increased – it is questionable if class inequalities in relative terms have declined; the research findings do not adequately support such a conclusion.

It was expected that comprehensive reform and abolition of early selection would make the terms of competition in securing educational qualifications more favourable to the lower classes than under the selective system. However, relative inequalities seem to increase within the different types of schools meaning that comprehensive reform did not reduce inequalities in relative educational opportunities. As far as absolute class inequalities in achieving educational credentials are concerned, ‘expansion rather than comprehensive reorganisation is likely to be the generative process that lies behind the narrowing of the absolute gaps between the classes’ (Heath and Jacobs, 1999, p. 20).

As reported in the concluding section, the main changes in educational outcomes have been considerable growth in the acquisition of some kind of qualifications across the 20th century, the convergence of school types in the access they provide to educational qualifications and the narrowing of gender differences. Class inequalities have weakened in absolute terms, whereas relative class inequalities have shown little change, despite a weakening of relative class inequalities among men.

Comprehensive reform seems to have played little role in the growth of educational credentials and in the decline of differences among school types. These changes are considered to be rather the result of autonomous social processes – and not of educational reforms – that would have happened even if the comprehensive reform had not been introduced.

The expansion of education, the raising of the school leaving age (at 16) and introduction of a lower level examination (certificate of secondary education) have been much more influential than the establishment of comprehensive schools; these changes removed the structural constraints which under the selective system had restrained pupils at secondary modern
The comprehensive reform has shifted the focus from age 11 to age 16 and competition for success at O level and above (intermediate qualifications) moving thus the locus of competition that now takes place within secondary schools rather than in access to them. Class differences and consequently relative opportunities within the different types of schools have tended to increase.

Following the conclusions drawn out of these research results, we could possibly judge that even if the comprehensive reform *per se* did not significantly affect relative class inequalities, certain policy measures and interventions, definitely affected to some extent and at various levels educational structures; they particularly affected the association between class origin and education in absolute terms. The shift of school leaving age and the abolition of early age selection have obviously provided pupils from lower classes more opportunities for learning and more chances to access educational tracks reducing class inheritance effects.

Early selection and rigid segregation under the selective system favoured class inheritance since little opportunities and alternative options were offered to pupils. Each type of school pre-described and predicted a certain social status for its attendee.

Comprehensive schooling is usually criticised by defenders of selective education as sacrificing quality standards to an egalitarian levelling-down, whereas, retaining selection would have meant higher standards and better achievements. On the other side, supporters of the comprehensive reform emphasise the egalitarian aspects within a more inclusive educational agenda as well as improvement of educational achievements.

PISA results have demonstrated that in fact tracking into separate educational routes does not improve efficiency and pupils’ performance (for the skills tested); however it does reduce equity. Pupils in comprehensive education systems (Finland) perform better than those in selective systems (Germany), namely the average performance is higher and the distribution of results is narrower.

*Box 4: Comprehensive secondary education – building on success*

Since comprehensive education was introduced, barriers to achievement for many young people have been removed.

Annual government statistics of attainment, examination results, and participation in further education are clear evidence of ‘levelling-up’ over the last 25 years.

In areas where there are selective systems evidence indicates that this results in an overall depression of achievement levels.

In some areas of England it is reasonable to regard comprehensive schooling not as a ‘failed experiment’ but as an experiment that has not yet been tried.

Social class remains a powerful predictor of life chances and a good social mix contributes to a school’s performance.
Policies, which favour some categories of school, and encourage further school choice of pupils and parents, could perpetuate outmoded inequalities in new guises. Assertions that selection works rely heavily on seeing only the winners in that sifting process. A modern economy relies on a learning society, which is rooted in a much more ambitious and inclusive strategy.


The merits and difficulties of the system have proved a controversial subject, and continue to divide public opinion in the UK. The tripartite system was formally abolished in 1976, giving way to the current comprehensive system, although elements of it persist in several counties.

### 4.2.2. German apprenticeship training

Secondary education in Germany is also based on early selection and separate educational pathways, however much different in its structure and operation. VET is mainly apprenticeship, dual-based training (Wolf, 2002); it combines two separate elements: training in companies funded by the employer and general vocational education delivered in public vocational schools. All apprentices participate in both parts of the dual system, as widely known. The majority of young pupils (approximately two thirds of a given cohort) follow the apprenticeship track, though increasing numbers combine the vocational track with higher education (university or polytechnic). Apprentices, after spending approximately three years with an employer, achieve the skilled worker status awarded by local chambers of commerce or other trades. The critical partners in the German apprenticeship system are first employers associations (chambers); second the unions and company-based work councils. Chambers are officially responsible for vocational training activities in their member companies including running final examinations. The dual system provides highly skilled and well-educated workers as well as a reliable and effective system for helping the transition from school to work placement.

Although the school education system is organised on a selective basis and separate educational routes (academic, general vocational and apprenticeship), it is flexible enough to allow horizontal transfer across educational routes to some degree and reverse the negative implications of early selection. The German education training system may be considered of high quality and effective in providing vocational qualifications harmonised with the needs of the labour market; on the other hand, it demonstrates high degrees of social inequalities and strong association of education with social origin.

The recent OECD article by Schleicher (2006) highlights the issue of social inequality in education as a burden that has prevented efficiency in education systems in Europe; in particular, it describes that overall variation in student performance and performance differences between schools tend to be greater in countries with rigid selection practices at an early age between types of programme and school. International comparisons also show (the author refers to the OECD’s PISA study) that the effects of social clustering are larger in school systems with differentiated types of schools than in systems in which the curriculum
does not vary significantly; the ‘PISA study reveals that social background plays a larger role in determining a student’s performance in countries such as Germany, France and Italy than in the US.’ (ibid., p. 12).

As noted by the author, the German school system divides kids at the age of 11-12 into different tracks (17). In the end, German children with parents in white-collar, high-skilled occupations have a four-fold higher chance of enrolling in tracks leading to university than those with parents from blue-collar or low-skilled occupations, even if students display the same level of educational performance at an early age. Educational reforms have been successful on many fronts, but they have shied away from tackling the inequality built into the German educational system.

The comparative study on Social mobility in Europe (Breen, 2004) also illustrated that in west Germany class inequality in education has been particularly high though decreasing. The analysis emphasised the particular association between education and labour markets that is directly mediated by employers’ unions. The system of vocational training characterised by strong education-labour market links and by marked horizontal differentiation in training specialisation is considered one of the institutional particularities responsible for high levels of immobility in west Germany.

‘Germany is one of the countries with the strongest links between educational attainment and class allocation, mostly due to the strong presence of occupational labour markets and their institutional links with credentials (18) provided through the system of general education and vocational training. These strong credentialist job allocation principles have not changed markedly so far. In such a context, it is particularly likely that a decline in class inequality in education will lead to higher social fluidity. But since other elements of class immobility have also been high in Germany and have not been reduced, it would not surprise us if west Germany still came out as a society which, compared to others, is characterised by quite strong immobility’ (Muller and Pollak, 2004).

Nevertheless, there are several reasons, apart from education and apprenticeship training, which influence the relatively low rates of social mobility and which are deeply rooted in historical evolution, national traditions and ideology.

(17) In Germany’s traditional school system, pupils at the age of 11-12 are divided into different educational tracks: grammar schools qualifying for universities, intermediate and principal schools qualifying non-university tracks including vocational training. However, there are also considerable numbers of comprehensive schools without such an early tracking.

(18) Although the detected class immobility in Germany may be attributed to some extent to the ‘strong credentialist job allocation principles’, the strong association between education and the occupational labour market ease transition from school to work and thus entry into the labour market for students graduating from VET pathways; in this respect, the situation (job placement) in Germany is relatively better than in other countries. See Cedefop, Descy and Tessaring (2001b, p. 335-351) and Cedefop (2001).
By comparison, in France, where social origin plays a decisive role in determining students’ performance as revealed by OECD’s PISA findings, the school system was progressively reshaped (end of the 1950s to the mid-1970s), changing from a highly-tracked system to a more unified and comprehensive secondary school (Prost, 1992). The gradual shift towards more unified models increased access to education for children of diverse social backgrounds and promoted equality of educational opportunities. But, the impact on democratisation and social fluidity mediated by education has been rather limited. Trends in inequality of social opportunity might be related to trends in inequality of condition; even if more educational opportunities are provided this does not necessarily result in increase of social fluidity.

4.2.3. The comprehensive experiment in Greece

In Greece, the comprehensive school experiment was influenced by a social egalitarian attitude within the broader context of a welfare state; it was mainly aimed to provide equal opportunities for learning beyond social discrimination and promote the standing and quality of vocational education considered to be low-level schooling (19). The Greek comprehensive school (Ενιαίο Πολυκλαδικό Λύκειο – EPL) was first established in 1984-85 and within the broad context of the debate on comprehensive versus selective systems. Its goal was to counterbalance social inequalities rooted out of education and affected by unequally distributed cultural capital, income, etc.

As stated in the official documents of the Greek Ministry of Education (YPEPTH, 1987), the comprehensive (or integrated) school had the following objectives to fulfil:

(a) to attribute a broader content to the term ‘general education’; to modernise and link general with vocational education and expert knowledge;

(b) to offer modern scientific and technological knowledge, general and specified, and above all, skills and knowledge that would match the needs of social and economic development in the country;

(c) at the same time, it should be in a position to adapt to continuous changes inflicted by radical technological development over conditions of work and forms of employment;

(d) finally, to offer all young people, without any discrimination, equal opportunities for education, development of skills and competences, promotion of talents, interests and skills.

In 1984-85, when the comprehensive school first operated, 64 % of students selected the general education tracks leading to higher education institutes (AEI, ATEI) (20), whereas

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(19) EPL (Ενιαίο Πολυκλαδικό Λύκειο), the integrated secondary school, ‘was developed in Greece on the grounds of social-democratic political ideas about economy, society and democratic life, similar to those in other European countries of post-war times’ (Patiniotis, 2005).

(20) AEI: Ανώτατα Εκπαιδευτικά Ιδρύματα – higher education institutes;
ATEI: Ανώτατα Τεχνολογικά Εκπαιδευτικά Ιδρύματα – higher technological education institutes.
36% selected the vocational education field. EPL offered students the option to follow higher education studies (academic or technological institutes) or vocational education making their choice among the different streams (combination of compulsory and optional subjects). EPL was successful in guiding pupils towards occupational fields and increased the value of vocational options. Ten years after the establishment of EPL, a growing number of pupils selected occupational fields and the percentage of pupils opting for general and vocational education was balanced due to the uprising quality and prestige of vocational streams within the framework of EPL.

Even at comprehensive school, pupils selected vocational streams, which were related to occupational careers mainly in the service sector, non-manual skilled and/or independent occupations. In spite of the fact that Greek comprehensive school was successful in terms of attracting more pupils towards occupational fields and of improving its status, it was finally abolished (1997) to be replaced again by distinct types of schools. The major reasons that led EPL from acceptance to abolition were: limited political support, inadequate and insufficient training of teachers, high cost of running, lack of adequate funding (Patiniotis, 2005).

Summarising the comprehensive experiment in Greece and discussing in general the status of VET, one could assume that inconsistencies and discontinuities in educational policies, as well as inefficient infrastructure and lack of adequate funding considerably affect the effectiveness of any attempt to reform VET systems. Even if access to all levels of education was increased and educational opportunities were equally distributed, low quality in the learning offer (VET curricula/learning methods) and inadequate policy interventions would inevitably turn VET into a low-level, second chance option, attracting only pupils of low educational achievement. Educational policies perceived as ‘egalitarian’ interventions should also be accompanied by specific measures aimed at elevating social respect and recognition of VET. Counterbalancing social origin effects on VET can be achieved to a large extent through application of quality standards in the learning process improving, thus, the status and relative mobility chances for those pupils who opt for vocational pathways. Fragmented interventions that are not embedded in a wider and consistent reform plan are likely to have little and only short-term impact on the effectiveness and social role of VET.

Box 5: Economic dimensions of adult training in Greece (KEPE study)

A recent study published by the Centre for Planning and Economic Research (KEPE, April 2005) in Athens about the Economic dimensions of adult training attempted – among other objectives – to assess the implications of vocational training on the position of trainees in the labour market – particularly on their participation in the labour force – on employment and unemployment rates, on exit from unemployment, on employment preservation and on incomes achieved in the market. The study documents the low incidence of vocational

(21) The evaluation of comprehensive schools in Greece was implemented by the University of Crete in the context of the project Reform of general education programmes (1994).
training (IEK and KEK (a)) in the country during the period 1998-2002, based on individual data, which derived from the labour force survey (National Statistics Agency).

The main outcomes are summarised as follows:

(a) increasing rates of students in higher education and technological institutes are detected in 1998-2002. At the same time the total number of places available in AEI/TEI increased due to new institutes established during that period;

(b) decreasing rates of students in vocational training (IEK, KEK);

(c) increased availability, thus more opportunities to succeed, in higher education institutes, decreased rates of demand for vocational training (% of registered students) (b). It is likely that in the years to come the number of IEK will diminish;

(d) vocational training programmes and vocational institutes are not the first choice of young people, but rather an option they would prefer to avoid;

(e) attending vocational training programmes (continuous vocational training) does not considerably affect the percentage of those departing from unemployment (marginally affects participants in IEK – initial training);

(f) the higher the level of education, the lower the percentage of those who risk departing from employment (losing their jobs);

(g) low-skilled individuals are more likely to exit unemployment than those attending vocational training programmes (c);

(h) training positively affects the probability of women participating in the labour market, while for men, who in any case participate for social reasons, its effect is insignificant;

(i) vocational training programmes offer rather little for job placement or job maintenance; nevertheless, as long as trainees are employed, acquired training significantly improves their salaries.

Despite this study not being explicitly concerned with social mobility and relative mobility chances of those participating in vocational training programmes, the findings confirm, on the one hand that prevailing strategy for pupils in Greece is to attain higher education, as it is likely to achieve better career prospects than any other educational route (d), and on the other the lack of trust in vocational training (long and short term) programmes (c).

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(a) IEK: Ινστιτούτο επαγγελματικής κατάρτισης [initial vocational training institute]
KEK: Κέντρο επαγγελματικής κατάρτισης [continuous vocational training centre]

(b) The percentage was 11.3 % for men and 13.4 % for women in 1998, while it decreased to 9.6 % and 10.2 % respectively in 2002 (age cohort 16-24).

(c) In 1999, the unemployment rate of those having attended vocational training (technical/vocational schools, IEK, short-term continuous training) was 14.5 % while the total unemployment rate was 12.2 % (+ 2.3 %); in 2002 the rates were 13.8 % and 10.5 % respectively (+ 3.3 %). 52.1 % of unemployed (both sexes) with vocational training qualifications had been in unemployment for 12+ months (2002).

(d) Unemployment %: AEI graduates 6.5 %, ATEI 12.2 %, secondary education 11.1 %, compulsory education 10.9 %, primary education 8.0 % (first semester 2006) (National Statistics labour force survey).

(e) ‘Learning does not automatically lead to employability. Employability is determined more by the ability to transfer core competences from one job to another and from one enterprise to another rather than by job-specific skills. It requires a sound educational foundation and a broad initial training upon which continuing learning can build throughout a person’s working life’ (ILO, 1999).
4.2.4. Either comprehensive or selective …

At international and European levels particular measures and changes have been initiated as far as upper secondary, post-compulsory education is concerned, either in the form of comprehensive schools integrating both general academic and vocational pathways, or through the shift towards more general and less job-specific vocational education curricula. Recent policies signifying the transition phase to the post-industrial, knowledge-based economy, have attempted to bridge theory and practice. The implications of such policies on social fluidity in the sense of equal opportunities have to be further investigated based on empirical data and thorough research; the educational reform in Britain has not provided significant impact deriving merely from comprehensive schooling. The comprehensive experiment in Greece has not provided adequate data to judge the impact of EPL on relative opportunities or the reduction of inequalities in educational attainment. In Germany, although the dual system has eased the transition from school to work and thus entry into the labour market for students graduating from VET pathways, the strong association between education and labour markets directly mediated by employers’ unions has been a critical parameter of social immobility.

The aforementioned case studies that demonstrate different implementations of selective and comprehensive educational patterns have shown that educational policies do not always achieve release from social inheritance effects deeply rooted in education unless they are embedded in a wider social reform agenda. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to claim that any intervention that aims to increase learning opportunities and, thus, reduce inequalities in educational attainment is of minor impact since other variables are more decisive and vital in affecting the origin/destination association (see OED triangle). Under certain conditions, stressing quality issues in vocational education may be more effective and influential than any innovative practice that attempts to lift social inheritance barriers by means of redefining selective systems.

From a theoretical point of view, it is accepted that mixed social environments in education involving pupils from all levels and of diverse social status are more likely to reduce class origin effects and class bias; however, it is not always easy to realise as in practice inequalities are defined by several means, such as regional inequalities, geographical segregation, gender discrimination, race, etc. On the other hand, any transformative action should be placed in the historical and socioeconomic context in which it is applied. Traditions, cultural influences, current socioeconomic developments affect differently the initiation of certain reforms and determine success, failure or minor/major impact on existing structures.

The trend towards convergence between general and vocational education has favoured changes that lead to:

(a) incorporation of general subjects in vocational/technical education curricula (in some cases, differences between general and vocational education curricula have become minor);
(b) students’ mobility from vocational/technical education to higher education institutes (access to higher education is decided primarily on general knowledge);

(c) implementation of quality standards to improve the status and effectiveness of VET.

Although several European countries have attempted to change the character of VET, it is not evident that its traditional role has essentially changed. All aspects of VET contributing to social stratification have to be reviewed and analysed before reliable policies and measures are promoted to modernise obsolete structures and perceptions.

The educational policies, which promoted the establishment of comprehensive upper secondary schools, intended to combine general and vocational education into more adequate types of schooling to meet changes in the production system and the labour market – which demand sound general education and flexibility – along with promotion of equal opportunities in culturally mixed environments.

It is still questionable whether comprehensive schools (lower and upper secondary) can be more effective and successful in achieving these goals. Further research and empirical data from various national settings are required to justify if comprehensive schools can reverse social inheritance effects as well as achieve high educational standards and learning outcomes.
5. **Soft skills: the decline of qualifications?**

Although national and European policies have stated particular goals to achieve in the years to come (Lisbon agenda 2010) and higher education/VET reforms have been implemented, the labour market seems to be moving faster, sometimes beyond traditional norms and work ethics. Changes and renovations in the sectoral composition of the production system and the occupational structure at macro level; process and product innovations, restructuring and new organisational/managerial forms within companies at micro level have dictated new imperatives for educational systems. Within this constantly changing environment, VET systems are called to accommodate the need for new skills and competences demanded by the labour market.

Despite the general assumption that credentials and certification should play the key role in determining the distribution of employment opportunities, emerging trends in the labour market suggest that the role played by qualifications – such as VET or higher education credentials – within the recruitment and selection process is often quite weak and limited (22). That is, merit as defined by educational achievement – either academic or vocational – tends to lose part of its validity in defining occupational destinations. The association between education and destination (OED) would inevitably become quite loose, if objective criteria were to be less important.

Surveys and research work particularly in the US and the UK (23) have shown that many companies in manufacturing and service sectors have introduced criteria that focus on personal skills, talents and attitudes rather than certifications, diplomas or university degrees, to recruit new personnel. Formal qualifications awarded by VET and higher education institutes are often undervalued as recruitment criteria, giving ground and validity to soft skills.

The definition of soft skills is broad enough to include a wide range of skills and abilities. In their variety, soft skills refer to a cluster of personality traits, social graces, and facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark each of us to varying degrees, as well as communication skills, problem-solving, team work, entrepreneurship, etc. Persons, who rank high in this cluster, with good soft skills beside formal qualifications, are generally the people that most employers would preferably hire.

One of the surveys concerning developments in the UK labour market, the DfES’s learning

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(22) With the exception of occupational labour markets where qualifications and credentials regulate access to occupations, e.g. in Germany (Section 4.2.2).

(23) Keep, 2004; Jackson, 2001; Jackson et al., 2002; Jonhson and Burden, 2003; Miller, et al., 2002; Spilsbury and Lane, 2000.
and training at work survey (24), highlights that only ‘22 % of employers, while interviewed, said that they took (formal) qualifications into account to a great extent when recruiting young people’ (IFF Research, 2000).

Box 6: Soft skills in the labour market

According to a research paper by Jackson et al. (2005(a)) employers are becoming less interested in educational qualifications. To test their hypothesis, Oxford researchers analysed 5 000 recruitment advertisements and interviewed people doing the hiring. Firms, they discovered, want employees with skills that formal education does not necessarily bring: ‘high touch’ as known in the jargon, rather than ‘hi-tech’. Typical examples are management jobs in fast-growing industries such as leisure and retailing, as well as posts in public relations, sales and customer care.

Employers themselves say much the same thing. ‘What our members want is office and personal skills rather than more advanced education’, says Matthew Knowles, policy adviser at the British Chambers of Commerce, a group for small and medium-sized businesses. ‘You see a lot of people from university who take three to six months to pick up the skills for an office job. They could do that by the age of 19 and start moving up. Instead they spend three years at college and then take a job they would have taken anyway.’

Financial-services employers echo those views. Bruce Collins, chief executive of Tullett Liberty, a City broker, admits non-graduates to his graduate trainee scheme. ‘We want interpersonal skills, awareness, attitude, eagerness to learn: are they rounded individuals? What’s their social life?’ he says. ‘They’ve got to come across well, not just talk the numbers but build relationships.’ The result, he explains, is a workforce where a ‘guy with an O-level in woodwork sits next to a guy with a PhD in mathematics’.

Oxford research showed formal qualifications featuring in only 25 % of the advertisements in the sample, typically for top-level jobs. In the ‘sales and personal service’ category, less than 10 % stipulated educational qualifications. What these posts did require were skills in communication and teamworking, and personal attributes such as good appearance, good manners, character and presence. Assuming, reasonably, that job adverts reflect what employers really want, this neatly explains why education matters less than believers in meritocracy expected.

‘There is some evidence that, over time, the influence of qualifications on UK labour market outcomes, at least as measured in terms of the promotion of intergenerational social mobility between classes, has actually declined’ (Jackson et al., 2002).

(24) DfES commissioned sample survey conducted by IFF Research Ltd of all establishments in England. Data are collected on employers’ recruitment difficulties, amount of training arranged or funded by employers and information on several training issues, e.g. employers’ awareness of, and involvement with, training initiatives. The 2000 survey also includes a section on the cost to employers of providing job-related training. The learning and training at work survey covers all employers in England and data are available at government office region, industry sector level and also by size of employer. The data for the 2000 survey were collected between July and October 2000.
The research findings illustrated above may not be considered as representative of cross-country developments and changes in recruitment criteria; they are only indicative of current trends in the labour market, especially concerning emerging ventures in the broad service sector.

While some of the skills included in the ‘soft’ cluster are undoubtedly trainable, such as team working, communication skills and entrepreneurship, others that belong to the core cluster of personality characteristics, attitudes and behaviours are closely related to and determined by social origin effects rather than the educational process. Self-confidence, leadership, creativity, discipline, attitude towards learning new things, social and cognitive skills and generally less identifiable traits are developed in the early stages of children’s life and, hence, are strongly influenced by the family environment (Espring-Andersen, 2005). Soft skills are harder to measure and identify than more fixed know-how such as technical requirements of a job and more sensitive and dependent on social background variables and parental cultural capital; however, it is not unequivocal that they cannot be developed and improved by adequate pedagogical methods. On the contrary, there are teaching methods and pedagogical activities that deliberately attempt to develop social skills beside hard skills particularly in the early stages of school life (pre-school, primary school), although this is not usually the main goal of the curriculum (Campbell, 2006).

In any case, emerging trends in the labour market have raised several questions on VET systems across Europe, not least at sectoral level. It may well be that the type and variety of new skills (technical and soft skills) demanded by employers in many parts of the service and manufacturing sectors are not covered by the current certification regime and are not implemented by all national VET systems. The development of VET curricula to match new skills and requirements of the labour market is widely discussed. New core skills and key competences frameworks initiated by international and European organisations and projects have already addressed social skills within a broader reform aiming to improve employability and prevent new forms of inequality likely to rise in the labour market.

Cedefop, Onstenk (2001) emphasises that broadening occupational and market requirements should lead to multidimensional analysis of skills required in the work place, which could not be restricted to the level of technical, job-specific skills. VET should ensure a broad base including technical, methodological, organisational and communicative as well as learning skills. There are different European models according to how they ensure responsiveness of VET to changes in occupational structure and the labour market. Two main strands are distinguished: (a) a general or core skills approach including emphasis on learning skills, (b) broad occupational competence or key competences approach. The first is limited to an addition to VET objectives, while the latter asks for reconsideration of both concepts and practices in VET.
Core knowledge, skills and attitudes that improve employability as defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) indicate a wide range of skills in a comprehensive approach including technical, social and intellectual – learning skills:

(a) intellectual skills for diagnosis and analysis, innovation and learning to learn;

(b) social and interpersonal skills involved in communication, decision-making, teamwork and adaptability, positive attitudes and behaviour, and the ability to assume and discharge responsibilities;

(c) business and entrepreneurial skills, including development of an entrepreneurial attitude at work, creativity and innovation, the ability to identify and create opportunities, calculated risk-taking and an understanding of basic business concepts such as productivity and cost and skills for self-employment;

(d) multiple technical skills in generic areas, which are central to several occupations that help occupational mobility.

The DeSeCo project is an OECD/INES initiative for the definition and selection of competences, which started in 1998. It was initiated by the Swiss Federal Institute for Statistics, with the help of the National Centre of the Education Department of the US. Among a concrete set of activities between 1998 and 2000, the project involved:

(a) analysis of former OECD indicator projects on competences such as the cross-curricular competences project (CCC), the international adult literacy survey (ILAS), and the human capital indicators project;

(b) study of existing theoretical and conceptual approaches to the concept of competences;

(c) identification and definition of theoretical sets of relevant competences in several disciplines: anthropology, psychology, economics, sociology and philosophy.

The various criteria are derived from analysis of the definitions and descriptions used in Flanders in various social spheres for notions such as competence, basic competence, core competence, key competence, professional attitude, and so on.

**Box 8: Competence building – the DeSeCo approach**

The concept of competence is defined in a broad sense to include knowledge, skills, insights and attitudes. The project defined six broad categories of competences:

**Category: social competences**

Sc 1: participating actively in society with respect to the multicultural dimension and concern for equal opportunities;

Sc 2: communication competences (including assertiveness, being able to stand up for oneself and maturity);
Sc 3: being able to cooperate.

**Category: positive self-image**

Sc 4: having a positive self-image with a view to self-development (including self-confidence).

**Category: being able to act and think autonomously**

Sc 5: competences in data acquisition and processing (including ICT);
Sc 6: problem-solving competences;
Sc 7: self-guidance and self-regulation (including a sense of responsibility);
Sc 8: being able to think and act critically and reflectively.

**Category: motivational competences**

Sc 9: having the courage to explore and being eager to learn;
Sc 10: sense of initiative.

**Category: mental agility**

Sc 11: creativity and inventiveness;
Sc 12: flexibility and adaptability.

**Category: functional competences**

Sc 13: linguistic competences;
Sc 14: technical competences.

Both the core skills approach and the competence building approach emphasise reconsideration of knowledge and skills to answer how education and VET may respond effectively to emerging demands in the labour market considering technical skills are not the sole factor leading to employability. As mentioned before, new ethics and norms in the labour market have put into question the issue of equality in opportunities and the role of education and VET as a mediating parameter. New demands tend to increase social inheritance barriers and improve the comparative advantages of upper classes in their way to employment.

The inclusion of soft skills in VET curricula along with reforms towards convergence between general and vocational contents may prevent negative effects that could hamper the VET role in providing high quality qualifications. It is worth to note that development of soft skills in a broad sense should not be limited to the context of VET programmes and curricula; since soft skills involve, among other skills, individual traits and attitudes that derive from the early stage of life, changes at all levels of education starting from pre-school and primary school education should be concerned.
6. Conclusions

Social mobility is defined either as a result of class structural change, namely movement between class origins and destinations affected by significant changes in the socioeconomic and occupational structure (absolute mobility) or as social fluidity meaning mobility within the class structure (relative mobility). Social fluidity is influenced by the relative chances individuals from different class origins have of attaining different class positions. Structural changes, although predominant in affecting absolute mobility rates, may be less affective if the aim is to increase relative mobility in a given socioeconomic and cultural context. The focus then has to be on policies to reinforce the mobility potential of individuals between class origin and class destination.

Social mobility theories have analysed the role of education as a determinant of the class position that an individual comes to occupy; social mobility research examines the relationships between class origins and educational attainment, and, educational attainment and class destination. Educational resources, cultural capital and income distribution have a critical role to play. Policy interventions in particular areas, notably those that affect equality of conditions (ascribed factors) and of opportunity, are likely to influence relative mobility in modern societies.

Whether education and educational policy can make a difference to social class inequalities has been widely debated in the sociology of education as well as in social mobility theories; however, which policies and measures are adequate and effective to reverse inequalities rooted in education systems remains an open question subject to socio-political discourse.

Even if certain measures and policies are promoted and educational reforms (universal access to all levels of education, expansion of compulsory education, increase of school leaving age, etc.) are successful in weakening the link between class origin and educational attainment, there are still several factors (social exclusion, poverty, cultural background, regional inequalities) that influence pupils’ academic ability and, hence, educational achievements.

The direct influence of origin has started to become more important again, after a post-war interval during which educational qualifications seemed to be the way ahead towards better occupational and social positions. The role of school may still be strong in providing opportunities for better positioning, however, it seems that it’s not getting stronger – and could even be reducing. Reductions in relative educational inequalities should be attributed to wider programmes of social reform, notably in Scandinavian countries, rather than to single educational policies.

VET, though part of the education system as a whole, could be considered as having a particular role in mediating distribution among occupational positions. The distinction between general and vocational education, which was reflected in the dichotomic structure of the secondary level leading pupils to different educational routes (general/vocational), is rooted in the foundations of socioeconomic models and mainly in the hierarchical structure of
labour division and occupations in industrial and pre-industrial societies.

Based on this hierarchical structure, the dichotomous or selective education system in its pure form – that used to be the dominant educational paradigm for a long time – contributed to the reproduction of social and occupational hierarchy. Vice versa, the basic distributional function of education systems was implemented through distinct educational pathways that predicted to great extent future class destinations. Consequently, VET has been conceived as a choice or educational orientation leading pupils towards lower and intermediate positions in the socio-occupational structure and, attracting mainly children of less favoured social backgrounds. In particular, selective systems that favoured rigid selection of educational orientation at an early age (the tripartite system in UK) have considerably contributed to social reproduction effects.

Traditional strategies to reduce social inheritance effects have promoted policies aiming to avoid early tracking and endorse comprehensive schooling. However, research and empirical data drawn out of particular cases (the British comprehensive reform) have shown that comprehensive reform did not significantly affect relative class inequalities, although it increased access to all types of schools for pupils of different class origins. It rather shifted the ground of competition in securing educational qualifications than reducing inequalities in relative educational opportunities. The shift of school leaving age and abolition of early age selection have obviously provided pupils from lower classes more opportunities for learning and more chances to select educational tracks reducing class inheritance effects more effectively than comprehensive reform per se. These changes are considered to be rather the result of autonomous social processes – and not of educational reforms – that would have happened even if the comprehensive reform had not been introduced.

At international and European levels particular measures and changes have been initiated as far as upper secondary, post-compulsory education is concerned. Either in the form of comprehensive schooling (the comprehensive experiment in Greece) integrating both general academic and vocational pathways, or through the shift towards more general and less job-specific vocational education, recent policies signifying the transition phase to the post-industrial, knowledge-based economy, have attempted to bridge the gap between theory and practice and address current developments in the occupational structure.

The current shift in the direction of convergence between general and vocational education has put into practice changes that favour:

(a) incorporation of general subjects into vocational/technical education curricula;

(b) students’ mobility from vocational/technical education to higher education institutes;

(a) implementation of quality standards to improve the status and effectiveness of VET.

The implications of such policies on social fluidity have to be investigated based on empirical data and thorough research. On the other hand, any transformative action should be placed in the historical, socioeconomic and national context that it is applied. Traditions, cultural
influences, current socioeconomic developments affect in different ways the initiation of
certain reforms and determine success/failure or minor/major impact on existing structures.

Despite the general assumption that credentials and certification should play the key role in
determining the distribution of employment opportunities – providing, thus, for meritocratic
selection against ascription – emerging trends in the labour market suggest that the part
played by qualifications, such as VET or higher education credentials within the recruitment
and selection process is often weak and limited. Formal qualifications are often undervalued
giving ground to soft skills referring to a wide range of social skills and abilities such as
communication skills, problem-solving, teamwork, entrepreneurship, as well as
personality traits, social graces, and ease with language, personal habits, friendliness, etc.,
which apart from traditional norms and ethics in the labour market, may also question
traditional concepts of social analysis.

Emerging trends in the labour market have raised several questions on VET systems across
Europe concerning the type and variety of new skills (technical and soft skills) demanded by
employers in many parts of the service and manufacturing sectors. The development of VET
curricula to match new skills and requirements of the labour market is widely discussed. New
core skills and key competences frameworks initiated by international and European
organisations and projects have already addressed social skills within a broader reform aiming
to improve employability and prevent new forms of inequality that are likely to rise in the
labour market.

Although the impact of educational policies on mobility trends seems to be limited if they are
not embedded in a broader social reform proposal, VET policies should strengthen their
efforts to achieve: (a) higher status and prestige that will convince parents and pupils that
VET is not a second-class choice; (b) high quality standards, including infrastructure, learning
methods and curricula as well as teachers training. The aim should be to: widely introduce
and validate integrated curricula (combination of compulsory and optional courses) that
enable flexibility and favour mobility between various educational streams; ease access to
higher education and/or other post-secondary education institutes; emphasise social skills that
could be developed through extra-curricular activities; ensure recognition of VET credentials
in the labour market.

Future research should focus on the impact of such policies implemented in their specific
national contexts, such as further research on comprehensive reforms in their various
implementations should highlight social mobility and equality aspects beside learning
achievements.

Social mobility analysis is closely related to class analysis theories; it is obvious that
inconsistencies and conflicting approaches in mobility theories and research results reflect the
complexity of a controversial issue such as social class analysis. Though important research
work has been done in the last decades, social mobility will continue to be central to the
social research agenda, as radical changes in socio-occupational patterns will inevitably affect
(and are already affecting) traditional concepts and theories.
## List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEI</td>
<td>Ανώτατα Εκπαιδευτικά Ιδρύματα [higher education institutes]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATEI</td>
<td>Ανώτατα Τεχνολογικά Εκπαιδευτικά Ιδρύματα [higher technological education institutes]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CASMIN</td>
<td>Comparative analysis of social mobility in industrial nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Céreq</td>
<td>Centre d’études et de recherches sur les qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CREST</td>
<td>Centre for research into elections and social trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeSeCo</td>
<td>Definition and selection of competences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfES</td>
<td>Department for Education and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPL</td>
<td>Ενιαίο Πολυκλαδικό Λύκειο [comprehensive lyceum]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESRC</td>
<td>Economic and Social Research Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEK</td>
<td>Ινστιτούτο επαγγελματικής κατάρτισης [initial vocational training institute]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILAS</td>
<td>International adult literacy survey</td>
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<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organisation</td>
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<td>INES</td>
<td>International indicators of education systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>KEK</td>
<td>Κέντρο επαγγελματικής κατάρτισης [continuous vocational training centre]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEPE</td>
<td>Κέντρο προγραμματισμού και οικονομικών ερευνών [centre for planning and economic research]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for international student assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGP</td>
<td>Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero [classification scheme]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OED</td>
<td>Origin – education – destination (triangle model)</td>
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</table>
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