

Working Class Students are Missing Out on Key Educational Subjects

(22nd Feb 2021) Lottie Moore and Katie O'Reilly-Boyles

During the pandemic childhood poverty has finally gained the political attention it is due, but education experts have been [highlighting the stark outcomes of class-based inequalities](#) for decades. Class disparities at school mean that many children miss out on the opportunity to study in their chosen fields or miss out on higher education altogether. **This leads to class disparities within chosen fields of study – an issue that urgently needs addressing so that individuals and the economy do not continue to miss out. [As these class disparities permeate the entire workforce](#), arts, culture as well as our medical and wider scientific fields are all affected – the whole country is poorer because of this.**

Students who do not have a parent who completed an undergraduate degree [are far less likely to choose STEM, arts and humanities subjects](#): First in Family (FIF) students are **nine percent less likely to take creative subjects** and **28 percent less likely to take medicine and dentistry** than they are Law, and **23 percent less likely to take mass communication and documentation** than they are to take Linguistics.

These students are instead more likely to choose law, economics or business-related subjects. This is part of a wider picture: **despite increasingly technological surroundings, the UK has one of the [lowest shares of students pursuing STEM](#)**. If the Government does not 'level up' in this area rapidly, academics predict a huge impediment to the UK's progress in science, medicine and technology. Furthermore, studies show that students from certain backgrounds (mainly female, working class and/or BAME) feel unwelcome in the areas of STEM.

Key findings from the [Inquiry on Equity in STEM education by the APPG on Diversity and Inclusion in STEM](#) shows that this problem is systemic. Within government, higher education and schools, indicating that attention needs to be paid to addressing subject inequity in all areas of the economy. Cuts to school funding have resulted in cuts to practical subjects like science, meaning that schools have failed to prepare or encourage these students to pursue these subjects. **As a consequence, [the proportion of working-class people in STEM careers is very low](#). Less than ten percent of life science professionals, 15 percent of academics and six percent of doctors are from [working class backgrounds](#).**

A similar trajectory is visible in Arts and Humanities. This government and its predecessors have systematically undervalued these subjects. They have been presented as a waste of time and investment. Unaffordable fees have been charged while students have simultaneously been urged to look for the economic value in such degrees. This rhetoric is especially harmful for students of lower socioeconomic status (SES). As in STEM fields, the [proportion of working-class people in creative industries is very low](#). The lack of social diversity in these fields means that **the diverse and creative culture that the UK has exported and is famed for is being winnowed away**.

To address these class inequalities, the UK Government must consider:

- increasing resources for teachers and university Widening Participation teams to support first-generation students at sixth form level in pursuing their ambitions and talents
- challenging the consistent rhetoric espousing the quantitative and monetary value of education
- appointing a minister to address inequity within the education system, and
- offering and publicising substantial bursaries for First-Generation students wishing to study STEM, Arts and Humanities subjects at university.

With the impact of both Brexit and the pandemic, it is more important than ever that the government addresses class inequalities in higher education. The UK will be stronger if the measures proposed above are taken. They will ensure the UK is supported by a diverse and creative workforce, of paramount importance as we emerge from the pandemic in the years to come.

** Parental education is a metric collected by UCAS. we've used to determine socio-economic background, instead of household income bracket or free school meals status (a measurement of those in extreme financial destitution and not necessarily an accurate indication of broader social class). Parental education is also particularly pertinent when discussing educational inequalities.*

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