

# Opportunity and social cohesion

Increasing ethnic and religious diversity – an inevitable product of globalization – often brings fears of social fragmentation. In today’s economic climate, however, the biggest challenge to social cohesion in the United Kingdom arises not from diversity. It comes from the significant decline in opportunities, particularly for the young.

British society has a long history of cultural diversity and it has generally held together thanks to its active civil society and the widely-held core beliefs in individual freedoms and opportunities, and rewards based on merit. But the impact of declining opportunities could cause these core beliefs to atrophy, resulting in a general erosion of social and political trust.

Research on the social effects of income inequality has provoked a wide public debate during the past year, most notably since the publication of Wilkinson and Pickett’s book, *The Spirit Level*. In this LLAKES Briefing Paper, we focus attention on educational inequality. We present international evidence to argue that growing educational inequality in the UK threatens social cohesion.

The education system is a crucial arbiter of life chances. Where it is perceived to distribute

opportunities equitably, it can provide legitimacy for the social and political order and thus promote social cohesion. However, in the UK educational outcomes are exceptionally unequal. Individual achievement in school is substantially affected by home background, and even more so by the social composition of the school attended. These powerful effects of social inheritance have led to relatively low, and declining, rates of inter-generational mobility. With a growing number of well-qualified young people fighting for diminishing job opportunities, there is a danger of widespread disillusionment and growing conflict over how educational opportunities are distributed. Both bode ill for social cohesion.

In this briefing, we draw on new LLAKES research to highlight the role that education systems play in promoting - or undermining – social cohesion across OECD countries. We have pulled together evidence from a variety of studies and analysed data from various international surveys, including the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), World Values Survey/ European Values Study (WVS/EVS), the European Social Survey (ESS), Eurobarometer and the Civic Education Study (Cived).

# Regimes of social cohesion

There have been quite different historical traditions of thought and policy on social cohesion within different parts of the western world. These have evolved over time, but comparative analysis of contemporary forms political economy can still identify three distinctive types of social cohesion in states which can be characterised as 'liberal', 'social market' or 'social democratic.' We refer to these as 'regimes of social cohesion' to emphasise their systemic properties which are relatively durable over time.

## Liberal

English-speaking countries (e.g. particularly the UK and the USA)

In liberal societies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, social cohesion has traditionally relied on the triple foundations of market freedoms, an active civil society, and **core beliefs in individual opportunities and rewards based on merit.** A wider set of shared values has not been regarded as essential for a cohesive society. Nor - in the British case at least - has a strong, or tightly defined sense of national identity. The state was not, historically, considered the main guarantor of social cohesion, beyond its role in the maintenance of law and order.

## Social Market

NW continental Europe (e.g. Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands)

The social market regime, by contrast, has relied on a strong institutional embedding of social cohesion. **Solidarity has depended relatively more on the state and less on civil society,** and rates of civic participation have generally been lower. Trade union coverage and public spending on welfare and social protection are high. These factors, along with concerted and centralized trade union bargaining, have helped to reduce household income inequality. Maintaining a broad set of shared values - and a strong national identity - has also, historically, been considered important for holding societies together.

## Social Democratic

The Nordic countries (e.g. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden)

The social democratic regime, like the social market regime, institutionalises social solidarity. However, here, **egalitarian and solidaristic values make a greater contribution to social cohesion. Levels of social and political trust are also much higher.** This cannot be attributed solely to greater ethnic homogeneity in these societies, although this may have once played a part in Denmark and Norway. Sweden is both ethnically diverse and highly trusting.

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## Social cohesion during economic crisis

Every country is affected by the challenges of globalisation and particularly so during periods of economic crisis. However, societies differ in what holds them together, and, consequently, social cohesion is vulnerable at different points in different societies.

### Liberal regime

The core beliefs of liberal societies (e.g. active civil society and individual opportunities) are seen to be embodied in the 'free market' which has become more dominant under globalisation.

Civic association has taken new forms, but is still relatively robust in countries like the UK and the USA. Without the need for a broader set of shared values, beyond their core beliefs, these countries are less threatened by social and cultural diversity.

What is likely to undermine cohesion in these countries is the rapid erosion of people's faith in individual opportunity and fairness.

The UK has high levels of income inequality and relatively low rates of social mobility. (Green 2011) Inequality and lack of mobility are likely to grow due to the disproportionate effects of the economic crisis (in unemployment and public expenditure cuts, for example) on young people, women, the low paid and those in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. As the prospects of secure jobs and home ownership diminish for many people, belief in the core unifying values of opportunity, freedom and just rewards are likely to decrease, causing social and political trust to diminish further.

### Social market regime

Social market countries have generally experienced less social trauma from the global financial crisis than liberal countries such as Ireland, the UK and the USA. Although most social market economies

suffered severe recessions, these were generally shorter and had a more even impact across all layers of society.

The free-market model of financial capitalism was never embraced as fully in social market countries as it was in the liberal states. The countries of north-west continental Europe have tended to balance the goals of individual opportunities with other, more social, goals. For the most part there is less income inequality than in the liberal group of countries, and social mobility in recent years has been higher.

Strains on social cohesion are, however, present in these countries. Increasing cultural diversity challenges the broader set of shared values and the 'national' culture on which social market countries have traditionally placed a high premium.

### Social democratic regime

While other groups of countries have experienced declines on key indicators of social cohesion in recent decades, the Nordic countries have shown substantial rises. On most measures, the Nordic countries score highly compared with other countries. Levels of social and political trust have been far higher since the 1980s; violent crime is generally less prevalent (although Finland has a relatively high homicide rate); and there is less perception of conflict between social and age groups.

Unsurprisingly, the response of the social democratic group of countries to the economic crisis has been to spread the pain as equally as possible. Although most Nordic countries experienced deep recessions, most have lower levels of public debt and unemployment than the liberal countries, which may allow quicker recovery. Arguably, the recession will have less effect on opportunities and life chances in these countries.

The main threat to social cohesion in the social democratic countries arises out of the pressures placed on their generous welfare states by population ageing and immigration. To date, people have been willing to pay for their universal welfare services through high levels of taxation. But with the rising costs of health care, pensions and social protection, the Nordic welfare contract is under considerable stress.

## Education, inequality and social cohesion

Education systems play a key role in determining future life chances and in mitigating or exacerbating social inequalities. These have been linked with various negative health and social outcomes, including high rates of depression, low levels of trust and cooperation, and high levels of violent crime.

We found that education systems which select students to secondary schools by ability and make extensive use of ability grouping within schools tend to exhibit more unequal educational outcomes than non-selective comprehensive systems with mixed ability classes.

### Educational Inequality in the UK

The four education systems in the UK perform somewhat differently. Those in Scotland and Wales produce slightly more equal educational outcomes at 15 than those in England and Northern Ireland, according to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). But the PISA results for the UK as a whole are dominated by the English sample and therefore mostly reflect the effects of England's education system. This system includes a mixture of selective and non-selective secondary schools with widespread use of ability grouping within schools.

The 2009 PISA study of literacy skills amongst 15 years olds shows that educational outcomes in the UK are more unequal than in most of the OECD countries where tests were conducted (Green, 2011).

The gap between the mean scores of UK students in the 90th and 10th percentiles was 246 points – the equivalent of six years of schooling on the average across OECD countries. PISA 2009 showed that the variance in scores in the UK have only reduced marginally since the 2000 survey. Amongst the 34 countries tested, the

UK had the 11th highest total variance in scores.

The impact of social background on performance is also relatively high in the UK.

The OECD has a composite measure (ESCS) for student social background characteristics which includes the occupation and education levels of parents, and cultural 'goods' in the home. The 'social gradient' predicts the increase in students' scores associated with a one unit increase in ESCS. The figure for the UK in 2009 was 44. Only 7 amongst the 34 OECD countries surveyed came higher on this measure (including Australia, Austria, Belgium, France and New Zealand amongst the more affluent ones).

The UK is also notable for degree to which the average performance within a school is influenced by the social characteristics of its intake. Across all OECD countries, on average, 57% of the performance difference between schools can be attributed to the social character of the intake. In the UK (and in Luxembourg, New Zealand and the USA) the social intake accounts for over 70% of performance difference between schools.

## Skills distribution and social cohesion

Variation in performance among school students is one of the factors which, over time, determines the overall distribution of skills within the adult population. We found strong links between social cohesion and the distribution of adult skills.

Cross-country analysis shows no association between average levels of adult skills and social cohesion measures. However, the distribution of adult skills has a significant effect on social cohesion, even independently of income distribution.

The more unequal the skills distribution among adults, the higher the rates of violent crime and civic unrest, and the lower the levels of social trust and civil liberties. For several of the indicators, these correlations also hold over time, suggesting that the relationships may be causal. It seems likely that wide educational disparities generate cultural gaps and competition anxieties which undermine social bonds and trust.

Our research suggests that it is not so much the average level of education in a country which matters most for social cohesion, but rather how the skills acquired are spread around.

## Education systems and civic competences

Civic competences are an important component of social cohesion. These refer to the knowledge, skills and values that people need to participate effectively in a liberal democratic society. We examined the links between education system characteristics and the levels and distributions of civic competences across countries.

When compared with comprehensive systems, selective education systems have:

- higher levels of social segregation across classrooms;
- greater disparities in civic knowledge and skills;
- larger peer effects on civic knowledge and skills - meaning that the latter are strongly affected by the social backgrounds and achievement levels of other students in the class. (Janmaat forthcoming).

The characteristics of the education system can also affect the development of common values between students from different ethnic groups.

Students who spend longer in mixed-

ability classes are more likely to share basic values in areas such as tolerance and patriotism, regardless of their social or ethnic group (Janmaat & Mons 2011).

Shared basic values (such as patriotism) are also associated with school systems with centralized decision making regarding curriculum matters.

Ethnic diversity in the classroom seems to promote tolerance in some countries, but not in all.

Our research shows that in Germany and Sweden, native majority students tend to be more tolerant when in ethnically diverse classrooms.

However, in England, no such relationship was found. Furthermore, in English classrooms white students were less tolerant the better their minority ethnic peers performed in terms of civic knowledge and skills. This may again be related status and competition anxiety.

## The learning process

We also examined how young people learn civic competences and active citizenship dispositions (Hoskins, Janmaat, & Villalba forthcoming).

We found that the amount of citizenship education received was unrelated to the acquisition of civic competences. However, learning through social participation and dialogue, both inside and outside school, shows a strong positive relationship with citizenship



# Values

knowledge and skills, and active citizenship dispositions, across a wide range of countries.

## Implications for policy

We urge policymakers in the UK to take account of the potentially negative impact that educational inequality can have on social cohesion. Three key findings provide evidence for this:

1. Greater equality in the distribution of adult skills appears to be associated with higher levels of trust and civic cooperation and lower levels of violent crime.
2. School systems produce more equal educational outcomes where there is less selection and ability grouping in the system. The most equal outcomes are achieved in countries where the schools vary less in their social intakes and performance, as in the Nordic countries (Green, Preston, & Janmaat, 2006)
3. Delaying selection to schools, and prolonging learning in mixed-ability classes, is also likely to reduce social segregation and promote the acquisition of shared values.

It may also reduce the status and performance anxieties which, in the UK, may be undermining the beneficial effects, found in other countries, of ethnically-mixed schooling on levels of tolerance.

But it isn't all about the way schooling is organised. How children are taught also matters.

Our research suggests that Citizenship education is most effective in promoting civic values and civic participation when the teaching and learning is highly interactive and when it addresses topics which encourage real debate.

Social cohesion in the UK has always depended on high levels of civic participation and a widespread belief in the availability of individual opportunities and rewards based on merit. In the current period of austerity, where opportunities for young people are substantially reduced, there is a serious danger that these shared beliefs will be eroded, thus weakening social bonds.

In such circumstances it is particularly important that the education system is seen to offer opportunities for all students (Green 2011).

One way of estimating the cohesion of a particular society is to look at its values and how they are distributed through different groups in the population. In our research, we have used a number of constructs to describe a society's values (Green and Janmaat 2011).

- **Key democratic values:** do people believe in the importance of active democracy at all levels of society? We found that support for key democratic values was highest in the social democratic and social market groups of countries. In the liberal group of countries, support for active democracy and gradual reform was linked to social class; people in lower income groups exhibited lower levels of support than they did in other groups of countries. Moreover, the gap in attitudes between lower and higher income groups increased from the early 1980s to the mid-2000s in the liberal group of countries, while remaining stable or decreasing in the other groups.
- **Political trust:** how much do people trust in politicians and the political system? We found that political trust declined markedly, between 1981 and 2005, in the liberal and social market groups of countries. In the UK, this decline continued after 2005 and was especially pronounced after 2008, the year of the financial crisis. However, in the social democratic countries, political trust increased during the same period.
- **Tolerance:** would people mind having immigrants as neighbours? We found that tolerance declined sharply in the social market group of countries between 1985 and 2005, yet remained stable in the liberal and social democratic states.
- **Post-materialism:** do people cherish tolerance, human rights and equality above their own physical and economic security? We found that the social market group of countries exhibit higher levels of diversity in post-materialist values than the liberal countries.
- **Contentious issues:** where do people stand on issues such as homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, taxation to help the environment, competition, immigration policy and collective versus individual responsibility for providing for people? We found that the social market countries exhibit higher levels of diversity on contentious issues than countries in the other groups.



LLAKES, an ESRC-funded Research Centre, investigates the role of lifelong learning in promoting economic competitiveness and social cohesion, and in mediating the interactions between the two.

Key areas of research include: i) the social and cultural foundations of learning, knowledge production and transfer, and innovation, within the context of a changing economy, and ii) the effects of knowledge and skill distribution on income equality, social cohesion and competitiveness.

LLAKES has a programme of multi-disciplinary and

mixed method research which addresses these issues at the level of the individual life course, through studies of city-regions and sectors in the UK, and through comparative analysis across OECD countries.

LLAKES aims to work with policymakers, education and training professionals, employers, trade unions and other interested parties to improve the way in which national and international research evidence is shared and used.

[www.llakes.org](http://www.llakes.org)

## Publications

Green, A., Preston, J. and Janmaat, J-G. (2006) *Education, Equality and Social Cohesion: A Comparative Analysis*, Palgrave.

Based on a wide-ranging theoretical critique, and extensive analysis of data on inequality and social attitudes for over 25 developed countries, this study shows how educational inequality undermines key aspects of social cohesion, including trust in institutions, civic cooperation, and the rule of law.

Green, A. and Janmaat, J-G. (2011) *Regimes of Social Cohesion: Societies and the Crisis of Globalisation*, Palgrave. Building on Green and Janmaat's previous work on education, equality and social cohesion, this book analyses the various mechanisms that hold different societies together and how these are withstanding the strains for the current economic crisis. As the crisis of globalization unfolds in the wake of the global financial crisis, social cohesion in each regime is vulnerable at different points.



Research Paper 4.

Available at: <http://www.llakes.org/Home/llakes-research-papers>

Mostafa, T. (2009). 'The Anatomy of Inequalities in Educational Achievements: An International Investigation of the Effects of Stratification.' LLAKES Research Paper 3.

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People's Learning of Citizenship', *British Educational Research Journal*.

Janmaat, J.G. (forthcoming). 'Ability Grouping, Segregation and Civic Competences among

Adolescents', *International Sociology*.

Janmaat, J.G. and Mons, N. (2011).

'Promoting Ethnic Tolerance and Patriotism: The

Role of Education System

Characteristics,' *Comparative Education Review*, 55, 1, pp. 56-81.