

1. EDUCATION LEVELS AND STUDENT NUMBERS

Is there a blue-collar barrier in higher education?

- There are large differences between countries in the numbers of students from blue-collar backgrounds who participate in higher education.
- In many countries, young people are substantially more likely to be in higher education if their fathers also completed higher education.

Significance

This indicator examines the occupational status (white collar or blue collar) and the educational status of tertiary students' fathers in some European countries. Opening access to higher education is not only a matter of equity but also a way to broaden the pool of candidates for high-skilled jobs and to increase countries' overall competitiveness. In many countries, however, far fewer young people from blue-collar backgrounds study in higher education.

Findings

There is relatively little internationally comparable data on the socio-economic status of students in higher education (i.e., university-level and vocationally oriented tertiary education, or tertiary types A and B, and advanced research programmes). This indicator covers only a sampling of European countries, but it marks a first attempt to illustrate the analytical potential that better data on this issue would offer.

Overall, there are large differences among countries in the degree to which students from a blue-collar background are represented in higher education in Europe. At 40%, Spain has the largest proportion of students whose fathers have blue-collar occupations, followed by Finland and Portugal at 29%. By contrast, for the remaining six countries covered here, young people from blue-collar families make up 20% or less of the student body.

These numbers, however, need to be understood in the context of the wider social picture – in other words, are the children of blue-collar families equitably represented in education? In Spain, the ratio of the percentage of students from blue-collar families (40%) and the percentage of 40-60 year-old men in blue collar jobs (45%) is close to 1 (about 0.89); by contrast, in Germany, 16% of students have blue-collar fathers, while 37% of men are in blue-collar jobs, making for a ratio of 0.43.

There are also large variations in the extent to which a father's level of education is reflected in the likeli-

hood of his children attending tertiary education. For all ten countries covered here, the sons and daughters of graduate fathers are more likely to be in tertiary education than young people whose fathers did not attend higher education. For example, in Portugal, 9% of men in the relevant age group have tertiary qualifications, but their offspring account for 29% of tertiary students, a ratio of about 3.2; by contrast in Spain and Ireland the ratio drops to 1.5 and 1.1.

Previous schooling may play an important part in preparing the ground for equal opportunities in higher education. Data show that countries providing equal opportunities in higher education are often those that offer equal education between schools in lower secondary education. Students from less affluent backgrounds may thus be more likely to participate in higher education if they have already been given equal opportunities in lower levels of education.

Definitions

The participating countries surveyed their students using the EUROSTUDENT core questionnaire. The definitions for blue-collar background and higher education used in EUROSTUDENT varies between countries, but is harmonised within each country so that ratios provide consistent estimates.

Going further

For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see *Education at a Glance 2008* (Indicator A7).

Areas covered include:

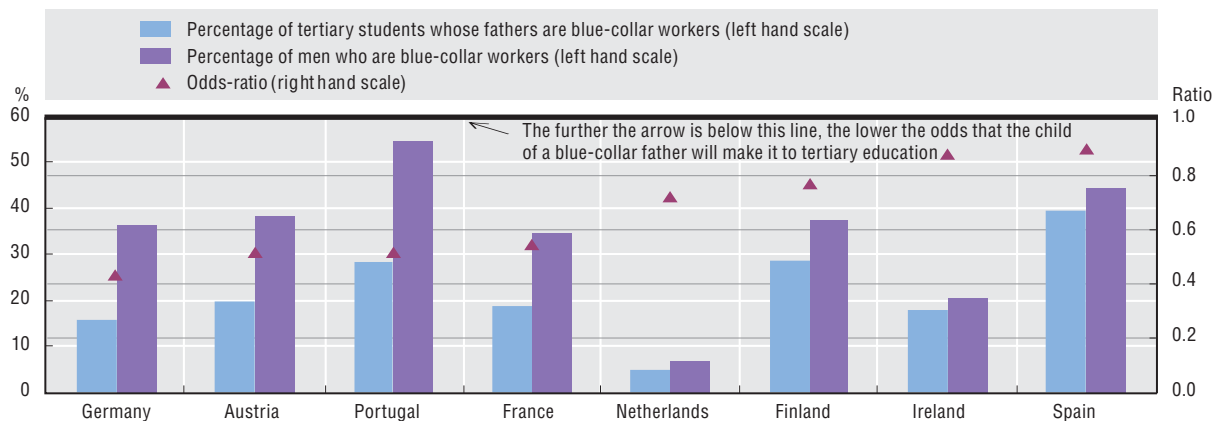
- Occupational and educational status of students' fathers.
- Proportion of students in higher education from a blue-collar background and between-school variance in PISA 2000.

Further reading from OECD

No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education (2007).

Figure 1.20. Occupational status of students' fathers, 2004

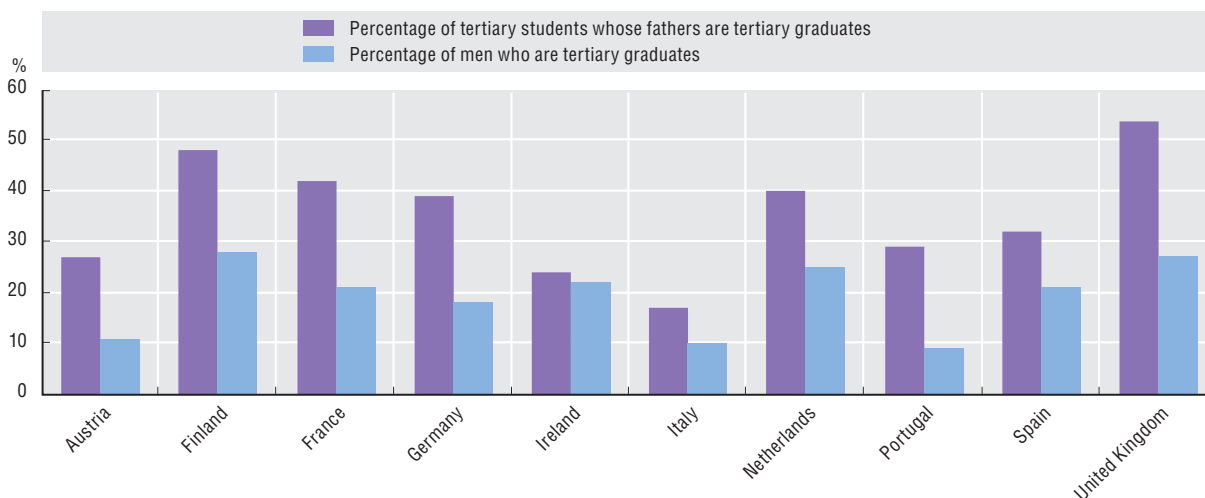
This figure shows the extent to which the children of men in blue-collar jobs (aged 40-60) are under-represented in tertiary education.



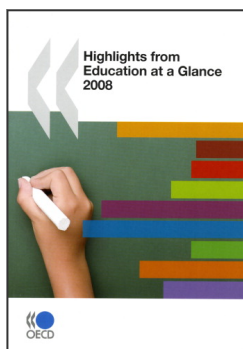
Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance 2008*, Chart A7.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401710587763>.

Figure 1.21. Educational status of students' fathers, 2004

This figure shows the extent to which the children of men (aged 40-60) who have attended tertiary education are over-represented in tertiary education.



Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance 2008*, Chart A7.2, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/401710587763>.



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