



Are All Subjects Created Equal?

Description

Are All Subjects Created Equal? Social Policy in 2016

Social mobility and higher education are inexorably linked. Access to the latter enables the former. On his appointment as rector of Mexico's **Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)**, Enrique Luis Graue Wiechers, put it quite simply when he [confirmed](#) that tuition would remain free for Mexican citizens because of the university's belief in its responsibility to promote social mobility: "If we charge [the students] tuition, it would limit their access to higher education, which would mean that we would contribute to ongoing inequality."

Inequality's documented rise...and repercussions

UNAM's rector was alluding to the gap he sees between Mexico's rich and poor, a problem that is far from consigned to the Latin American nation as, in recent years, growing levels of inequality have been identified by both the **OECD** and **IMF**. In Europe, the issue has conspired to reduce the size of the region's middle-income groups over the past decade, according to a new report from the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**.

The reasons for this, according to the report, are multitudinous yet many have their roots in the implications of the financial crisis and the changing nature of job structures, whereby traditional middle-income occupations, such as a teacher, can no longer necessarily be classified as such, and temporary contracts often form the solution to employers' cost-cutting dilemmas.

In any case, middle-income groups are important because, as the ILO study demonstrates, the larger the size of a country's core middle-income group (often referred to as its middle class), the smaller its level of income inequality. But, there are also wider implications at work here:

“A weaker middle class leads to lower aggregate demand, puts a break on long-term growth and may cause social and political instability,” [said Daniel Vaughan-Whitehead](#), co-author and editor of the ILO report.

Is higher education no longer a ‘sufficient asset’?

A central premise behind many of today’s higher education qualifications is that they are supposed to propel graduates into higher income brackets, yet even though the ILO [notes](#) education’s importance in this respect, it does so at the same time as suggesting that “higher education does not seem to represent a sufficient asset anymore for middle-income groups to avoid employment and income insecurity.” Education is therefore central to its recommendations for a new policy agenda that will target Europe’s middle-income groups with the goal of halting their further erosion.

Outside of Europe, **Yale University** launched a dedicated multidisciplinary research centre for the study of inequality just last year, acknowledging it is “one of the biggest challenges of our time” and that the US [continues](#) to have “one of the highest poverty rates in the developed world.” The centre [considers](#) inequality’s relationship to governance in the US with the ultimate aim of producing research that policymakers and civil organizations can actually use and of helping launch the careers of graduate students. It sits within the university’s wider social and policy studies institute – for addressing inequality is really just one aspect of this wider subject area – referred to as Social Policy & Administration in QS’s new [World University Rankings by Subject](#), where it is a new addition for 2016.

Crime, healthcare, housing, diversity – even the global trend towards inflated university tuition fees – are all areas that fall under social policy’s domain, a subject that has much to tell us about societal changes in an era of flux that might just be unprecedented for the extent to which its findings have global applications.

Scope for a booming social policy field

The changing higher education sector and, in particular, the advent of significantly higher tuition fees in the UK in 2010, is noted as a popular area of study within social policy programs by the **Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education** in a new subject benchmarking [statement](#). The increasing recognition that “many issues studied in social policy have international dimensions” has also been capturing institutions’ imaginations.

In this light, the stage could well be set for social policy studies to enter the spotlight. The **University of Birmingham’s Robert Page**, for example, recently [declared](#) that: “for those engaged in the study of social policy it is now an opportune moment to challenge the conventional wisdoms of the age,” adding that “rediscovering the intellectual curiosity and critical awareness of previous eras can help to revitalise the subject.” Page is the director of the University of Birmingham’s master’s program in social policy, where the discipline occupies a school of study offering programs across two departments, one of which focuses on the subject’s applications in the arena of healthcare services.

There is certainly versatility in the application of social policy’s teaching. The master’s-level programs

at the **University of Oxford**, for instance, can even be combined with an MBA from [Saïd Business School](#) as part of a two-year course of study. In the US, meanwhile, one can focus on social policy in the city from the metropolitan vantage point of New York, as a concentration within **Columbia University's** international affairs and public administration master's. At **Harvard University** – the institution which places first in the subject's inaugural inclusion in the QS World University Rankings by Subject – expertise in the field can be found attached to the joint and multidisciplinary PhD programs offered by the **Malcolm Wiener Center**, which also supports students whose work focuses on issues concerning the US's indigenous people.

Diversity – in the subject's potential areas of focus and application – appears to be the common thread between all these offerings and one which promises to serve the subject well at a time when students aren't always impressed by degrees whose 'one-size-fits-all' approach denotes equality, yet denies them a chance to tailor and customize their own educational experience.