



Revealed: the 90-point Leaving Cert class divide

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Education Editor

CHILDREN of professionals get an average of 90 points more in their Leaving Certificate than those born to manual workers, new research reveals.

The major new research is the first time the differences in performance between pupils from different social groups has been precisely measured – and it underlines the gap in Leaving Cert scores between richer and poorer students.

The research – which tracked how thousands of students did in their Leaving Cert – shows that:

- Children of professional fathers get, on average, 90 points more than those whose father is a manual worker.
- Children of other 'white collar' workers get on average 50 points more.
- Students whose father is disabled get about 50 points less than the average.
- Children whose father is unemployed get 30 points less.

Fees

The study, by Dr Kevin Denny from the UCD Geary Institute, says that the only way to tackle inequalities is to address the differences in performance between the various social groups in the Leaving Certificate.

It claims that the abolition of university tuition fees in 1995 has failed to improve the chances of poorer children getting to university.

Dr Denny says that few children from manual backgrounds get enough points for the most sought-after degree programmes such as medicine.

"By contrast, the chances of a student from a white-collar background achieving low points are quite low," he writes in a paper entitled 'What did abolishing university fees in Ireland do?'

The abolition of fees was defended last night by Niamh

Bhreathnach who was Minister for Education at the time.

She said that the free fees

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initiative raised the expectations of many who are the first graduates in their families and changed the mindset towards education for many parents.

But Dr Denny claims the only beneficiaries were middle-class parents who got a major windfall as they no longer had to pay fees.

He says the results of his analysis demonstrate clearly that the policy of abolishing university fees did nothing with regard to improving access to university among low socio-economic students, which was a stated objective of the policy at the time.

"Bearing in mind that most low income students would typically not have been paying university fees (since most would be in receipt of the higher education grant) one would not expect a reform which largely benefited better-off students to somehow benefit lower socio economic group students. The logic of this apparently escaped policy makers at the time," he suggests.

The Higher Education Authority last night welcomed Dr Denny's paper as "significant and well researched" and said that it expects the paper would contribute to ongoing discussions on the funding of higher education and the question of the student contribution as well as to the access debate.

Dr Denny collected his information by using data from the ESRI school leavers' surveys where 2,000 to 3,000 young people are interviewed nine months after leaving school.

He says that apart from social factors, it is striking that a student's father being disabled impacts on points.

This may be that having a disabled parent effectively imposes a cost on a student, perhaps through reducing the study time available to them if the student has to participate in home duties or take on paid employment.

"Since it is the disability of the father that matters, typically the main earner in the household, this suggests that it is the effect on household income that is driving this result," he says.