Longitudinal Educational Achievements: Reducing Inequalities (LEARN) Project

Paula Sergeant from Manchester Metropolitan University and Doris Hanappi from the University of Zurich present the Longitudinal Educational Achievements: Reducing Inequalities (LEARN) Project

Europe is home to some of the most highly educated societies in the world. However, deep inequalities in education remain both within and between countries in Europe. In 2018, the World Bank released a report which showed that socio-economic inequalities in learning outcomes, access to education and final educational attainment in Europe have been worsening since 2000. A 2018 report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) noted wide disparities in maths and reading within many European countries, between the highest and lowest levels of students' socio-economic background.

Moreover, these inequalities in education, as well as those related to gender, ethnicity and migration status, are likely to have been aggravated by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the associated loss of learning that came with school closures. Ingrained inequalities in access to and outcomes of education represent a threat to an ideal of inclusive high-quality education. Persistent gaps in access to and outcomes of education continue to undermine Europe's vision of truly inclusive, high-quality learning for all. The LEARN project is addressing these challenges by collating and generating new evidence about educational inequalities, based on high-quality longitudinal data across Europe.

Understanding inequality through educational transitions

LEARN employs an educational transition perspective that can be applied comparatively across different national education systems. This approach is sensitive to the key areas of inequality production, examining the emergence and development of inequalities throughout educational careers in nine case study countries: Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. It will formulate practical evidence-based guidance to allow policymakers across Europe to address them.

High-quality longitudinal cohort data and government register data throughout Europe are usually national and therefore, limited to a within- country focus. LEARN addresses this limitation by including an array of countries representative of the heterogeneous social, economic and education environments that can affect how inequalities develop. The LEARN project can attain a more nuanced understanding of how educational inequalities develop over educational careers and persist in later life, and can be addressed through targeted policy interventions.

The paradox of progress: Expanding access, persistent Inequalities

The 20th century saw a large-scale increase in accessibility to educational opportunities in Europe, firstly with the expansion of primary and secondary education and compulsory schooling ages, to more recent improvements in access to tertiary education and the expansion of early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Yet despite the marked expansion of education systems and the resultant major increase in the average educational attainment of country populations, the association between social backgrounds and educational inequalities has remained remarkably stable, even as other inequalities, such as the lower educational attainment of women versus men, have been mitigated.

Inequalities in educational achievement, aspirations, decisions, and choice of fields remain pronounced along socio-economic, gender and ethnic lines, along with intersections of these characteristics, yet even as barriers to progressing in education have been lowered, inequalities in years in education and differential access to higher education reflect continued quantitative and qualitative inequalities of social origin.

Addressing such inequalities through policy is vital, not only on account of their effect on educational outcomes, but also in recognition of the prolonged disadvantages they hold over the life course, and the economic and social implications such inequalities manifest if not addressed.

To date, studies have focused on within-country contexts with findings largely limited by transferability concerns. Differing education and welfare systems potentially limit the representativeness of findings in one country to others, constraining the policymakers' toolkits in developing large-scale, transferable responses.

While existing comparative research evaluated datasets such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) to evaluate inequalities comparatively across states, the cross-sectional nature of such datasets constrains the ability of researchers to examine causal chains and how inequalities develop over the life course.

Similarly, evidence-informed policy changes to education being enacted by governmental and non-governmental agencies using evidence from rigorous randomised control trials, are largely limited in their policy impact to the states in which such trials are enacted, resulting in a wealth of empirical evidence being siloed owing to transferability concerns.

LEARN is collating and synthesising disparate data sources and previous findings to create a detailed understanding of the development and effects of policy changes on educational inequalities, both within countries and comparatively. This benefits researchers, who, by collating information from various sources, can obtain a clearer, more nuanced insight than would be possible from a singular data source.

Building evidence for systemic change

The LEARN project connects evidence across national contexts and educational stages to reveal how inequalities emerge and persist over time. It goes beyond identifying what inequalities exist to explore how they develop and why they endure across generations and countries. Meaningful progress in education depends on letting evidence shape reform. Lasting change comes from using comprehensive, comparable data to guide policy and practice across all levels of education.

Findings from LEARN's work on [Closing the Attainment Gap](#) and [Mapping the Education Evidence Base](#) show that tackling inequality requires inclusive education policies and stronger evidence systems built on broad socio-economic indicators. Transparent placement criteria, early desegregation, and targeted family support can make educational transitions fairer, while mental health, career, and financial support services strengthen wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

LEARN also underscores the importance of collaboration and capacity building. Developing an evidence-literate profession and strengthening cooperation between researchers, educators, and policymakers, supported by sustained investment in cross- national networks, ensures research informs both policy and practice.

In the months ahead, LEARN will deepen its analysis of how educational inequalities evolve across Europe. National teams will use longitudinal data to study early education, tracking, and socio-economic factors, while cross- national comparisons will identify which policies promote inclusion and which reinforce disadvantage.

Findings will be shared through policy briefs and stakeholder dialogues, marking a step towards more evidence- informed education policy in Europe.

- [The SES Gradient on tracking](#)
- [Peer effects and school choice](#)
- [Adolescent wellbeing and educational policies](#)
- [Examining educational identity](#)

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