

# Social disadvantage in the future

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The past decades have been marked by a strong upward trend in social mobility. Today, the number of people who have completed secondary or tertiary education is considerably greater than twenty years ago. Yet some young people still leave school without the basic skills needed to function well in society. Furthermore, talent sometimes goes to waste. In this exploratory study, the Education Council maps out social developments and the associated risks of disadvantage. Following on from this, we identify a number of policy implications.

## *Social developments make it necessary to develop new skills*

In the years ahead, a number of social tendencies will drive developments in the labour market. Dejuvenation and an ageing population mean that there is an increasingly smaller group of economically active people in the labour market responsible for keeping the economy moving and maintaining social services. Furthermore, increasing internationalisation in more and more professions means that knowledge of foreign languages is required, as well as a flexible attitude towards other cultures. The continuing tendency towards individualisation causes many people these days to combine work with care responsibilities. The increasing role of ICT demands data processing skills. Finally, flexibilisation of the labour market means that workers need to be increasingly adaptable.

## *Risk of disadvantage greatest for the children of low skilled parents*

In this exploratory study, the Education Council has identified a number of risks of disadvantage. There is an individual risk when a child's development is hindered by physical, mental, psychological or psychosocial factors.

But there are also collective risks of social disadvantage. The level of educational attainment of the parents is still the best predictor of the school career and the social success of children. The children of low skilled parents tend to follow a programme of education at a lower level than the children of highly skilled parents. This means that they are more vulnerable in the labour market. A low level of educational attainment is not only associated with poorer skills in language and arithmetic, but also poorer skills in foreign languages, a lack of flexibility and poor data processing skills.

Although the ethnic background of children is still a factor in the school career, its influence is on the wane. The current generation of children from Turkish or Moroccan backgrounds are set to do increasingly well at school. There is, however, a problem with talent going to waste, especially in languages. The previous discrepancies in the levels of educational attainment between boys and girls have also disappeared. While girls do, on average, obtain better learning outcomes, this is partly attributable to their better social skills and the ability to work independently. By contrast, the technical and mathematical potential of girls is still not being fully exploited.

## *Policy implications: invest in the future*

The outcomes of this exploratory study demonstrate the importance of investment in limiting the risks of future social disadvantage and wasting of talent. Three particular areas of attention have been identified. The Education Council emphasises the importance of investing in as many people as possible obtaining a minimum educational foundation, comparable with the initial qualification. Without this foundation, young people will be at a disadvantage in society – a disadvantage that will only increase throughout their careers. Good standards of literacy and numeracy and a basic command of English as a second language are essential for individuals to remain engaged in an increasingly competitive society. Children of low skilled parents in particular, as well as children with individual cognitive, psychological or social problems run a considerable risk of long-term unemployment, health problems and social exclusion. The cost to society as a result is high.

By optimising talent development, we could reduce future shortages on the labour market and contribute to the innovative capacity of the Netherlands. The stubborn distinction between male professions and female professions has a counter-productive effect. The education system could help to break away from the traditional subject choices and the corresponding gender segregation in the labour market. One final point of attention is this: in the future, workers and citizens in general will increasingly be expected to have competencies such as problem-solving skills, critical thinking, independent working, collaboration skills and social and communication skills. The need for skills like these will no longer

be the preserve of higher positions. Young people who have not acquired these skills while in education will face problems in the labour market. For low skilled workers too, social competencies and other advanced skills will become increasingly important. In this exploratory, the Education Council therefore emphasises report the importance of devoting time to this in all types of education.