

# What do we know about class in academia?

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## Introduction

In recent decades, research interest has continued to grow regarding representation and discrimination within the highest levels of the education system and the career trajectories of those who reach such levels. Academics and researchers can be said to hold elite positions, at least based on their level of education, and it is important to understand inequality and exclusion in this area for two key reasons. First, the education system is often viewed as a key source of social levelling and mobility, based on meritocratic principles. Second, as producers of knowledge, researchers play a crucial role in shaping policy and influencing the general understanding of society, and thereby possess a degree of power. It is therefore important to ensure that a broader range of perspectives and life experiences are represented within this group, and the perspectives of marginalised groups are perhaps especially important.

In research, there has been a particular focus on gender and ethnicity in relation to equality and inclusion. However, in recent years, there has also been an increasing awareness of ‘first-generation students’ – students who are the first in their family to attain a higher education – and their experiences with the education system. These discussions have gained significant attention in the United States and United Kingdom, but are also increasingly relevant in Norway (see, for example, Mamelund, 2021). There is also a long and rich tradition in the social sciences of studying social mobility, i.e. the extent to which individuals hold positions in society that differ from those of their parents, through the education system. This research has shown that social background plays an important role in how individuals navigate the education system, in terms of performance and choice of disciplines and levels, both internationally and in Norway (Seehuus, 2019; Strømme & Wiborg, 2024).

In simple terms, we can envision the entry into an academic career in three stages: the choice and attainment of a higher education, the transition to a doctoral degree, and employment as an academic staff member. Our understanding of the first of these three stages is relatively good. The impact of social background on the choice and attainment of a higher education is well documented in the research literature, including in Norway. However, the focus of this report is on the last two transitions: the impact of social background on recruitment to doctoral programmes and attainment of a doctoral degree, and for appointments to academic positions after completing a doctoral degree. There are relatively few empirical studies in this area that directly examine the significance of social background or class, but there are signs that research in this field is gaining momentum.

In 2024, Statistics Norway published a report that, for the first time, provided an overview of the educational levels of parents of researchers and academics in Norway

(Wendt & Øye, 2024). The report shows that academics in Norway constitute a select group: 66% have parents with a higher education. This particularly applies to young researchers. Meanwhile, the proportion of academics whose parents do not have a higher education decreased in the period 2012–2022. This may be an indication that this group will continue to set itself apart from the broader population in terms of social background, although part of this trend can also be attributed to the overall rise in educational attainment across the population.

## Method

In order to map existing knowledge on social background and recruitment to academic careers, I conducted a survey of relevant research literature. The search terms aimed to capture both social background and class, as well as academic careers and doctoral pathways. Keywords were combined to capture the broadest possible range of research on these topics, particularly the most central contributions. In Norway, I also searched the websites of potentially relevant research institutes: the Institute for Social Research, Fafo, NOVA – Norwegian Social Research, the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education, the Work Research Institute (AFI) and SINTEF. I searched Google Scholar and Web of Science for international research. In addition to conducting open searches with the selected combinations of search terms, I used Google Scholar's 'cited by' function for particularly relevant contributions. I also manually reviewed the reference lists of what I considered to be the most central contributions. For Norwegian doctoral theses and master's dissertations, I conducted searches in ProQuest and DuO. A total of 45 particularly relevant contributions were ultimately identified.

I will now briefly describe some of the highlights from the research literature before discussing the areas where more knowledge is needed in Norway.

## Main findings – representation and diversity among academics

As far as I am aware, Arne Mastekaasa's study from 2006 is the only study from Norway that explicitly examines social background and recruitment to doctoral programmes. The author uses Norwegian registry data, grounded in the idea that the significance of social background should diminish as students advance through the educational system. The study applies the concept of 'social class' (according to the EGP class scheme), but different definitions and interpretations are also discussed throughout. Mastekaasa analyses the significance of having parents who work in higher education or research, as well as parental income. The dataset used for the analysis consists of the population that attained a master's degree from a Norwegian university between 1985 and 1996. The registry data also include information about lower second school grades, which helps provide a more nuanced picture of selection into doctoral programmes. Overall, the study shows that class background, particularly service class, is positively associated

with progressing from a master's degree to a doctoral degree. This association remains even after accounting for lower secondary school grades, with the likelihood of progressing varying between 13 and 20 percentage points.

This study also represents a broader research tradition that uses quantitative data to study representation in doctoral programmes and academic positions, particularly in the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States. Overall, the findings from this literature are mixed. Most of the studies show that social background plays a role in selection into doctoral programmes, while some identify patterns similar to those found by Mastekaasa (2006): social background impacts on selection into doctoral programmes, but the effect is weaker than at earlier stages of education. In practice, this means that the most important variable for understanding inequalities in access to doctoral programmes is selection and choices made at lower educational levels. A British study (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022) shows, for example, that there is selection into doctoral programmes at elite institutions, but that this association largely stems from the fact that children of parents with a privileged social background also pursue lower degrees at such institutions. Other studies, such as Posselt and Grodsky's (2017) US study, find a greater degree of social stratification at the graduate and postgraduate level than at the undergraduate level. In general, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that employment after completing a PhD represents a source of unequal distribution. However, since the group is very small, it is often more challenging to provide precise estimates of the effects of social background among those who have completed a doctoral degree. This issue is also addressed by In and Breen (2023), whose work is based on empirical data from the United Kingdom. They argue that the most significant effects occur earlier in the educational trajectory. Selection into higher education in general accounts for the greatest unequal distribution in terms of social background and subsequent occupational outcomes, and doctoral degrees act more as a safeguard against downward social mobility, rather than an actual ticket to upward social mobility.

In a yet-to-be-peer-reviewed study, Borgen et al. (2024) explicitly examine the social background of academics in Norway, using updated registry data covering the country's entire population. Preliminary results show, perhaps surprisingly, that there is a relatively large degree of diversity among Norwegian academics. Almost 40% of university professors have parents with no higher education. However, there is a major disparity in the probability of becoming a university employee based on parents' education, with a roughly 27 times higher likelihood for children of parents with a PhD compared to children of parents without an upper secondary education. Parental education also appears to play a larger role than parental income. However, the effect of social background largely disappears when accounting for an individual's educational attainments. In other words, it seems that earlier-stage selection, such as entry into higher education in general, plays the largest role in unequal distribution among academics.

Alongside the quantitatively oriented literature on mobility in academia reviewed so far, there exists a rich body of qualitative research examining how social background – particularly framed as social class – shapes the experience of navigating academia with a working-class background. Fourteen of the studies in our review fall into this category, and the vast majority (11) are from the United States and England. Much of this literature draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital, as discussed earlier in the report, and highlights various challenges related to exclusion, alienation and discrimination faced by doctoral students and university employees with a working-class identity. The main finding in this part of the research literature is that class background, in the same way as gender or ethnicity, can represent a source of systematic exclusion even within academia. The specific ways in which social background manifests also appear to vary across disciplines and types of institution. There are no Norwegian studies on this, but it is reasonable to assume that the experiences described could also be found here. A recent master’s dissertation on sociology from the University of Oslo is relevant in this context. It examines working-class students earlier in their educational pathway but is still closely related to the theory behind this research tradition (Lie, 2022). The dissertation highlights identity issues similar to those described above. In the broader public discourse on diversity in the higher education sector in Norway, which includes perspectives on class, similar experiences have been described by first-generation academics themselves. Beyond being a minority facing unique challenges in academia, social background or class represents a less visible form of inequality. When equality and inclusion based on, for example, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity, are given a relatively strong focus in diversity policies, the lack of attention to the experiences of first-generation academics can feel especially burdensome.

### More knowledge needed

In summary, this review has led to two main findings: First, there is reason to believe that social background plays a role in the access to academic careers. This applies both indirectly, through achievements and education *prior to* the doctoral level, but also in the transition from a master’s degree to a doctorate. Less is known about the drop-out rate at the various stages, and a key question that future research should address is where in the educational trajectory any class-based selection into academic careers and research positions occurs. This is crucial for implementing policy measures aimed at increasing diversity and representation. Second, the qualitative research literature shows that academics and doctoral students with a working-class background face different challenges from their peers. International research has found that working-class academics are more likely to experience professional isolation, a lack of networks, insecurity and a sense of exclusion. Although no direct empirical studies have been conducted on this in Norway, there is no reason to believe that Norwegian academia would differ markedly in this respect.

The lack of literature on Norwegian academics means there is a need for research in several specific areas. First, we need robust quantitative analyses of the selection into doctoral programmes and then advancement to academic positions. As discussed, understanding this is crucial for the implementation of policy measures aimed at increasing diversity and representation. Qualitative studies are also needed into the potential barriers and limitations for first-generation academics. These types of studies will be better able to identify the mechanisms behind any unequal distribution in recruitment and will be important for identifying relevant measures at the institutional level. Several relevant approaches can be used here, and studies of those who apply for doctoral research fellowships and their (class-based) experiences and challenges, as well as studies of those who temporarily or permanently drop out of their doctoral studies, will all be relevant.

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