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Version: Published Version

Conference or Workshop Item:

Bennett, Ieuan (2018) Born to fail? How influential was class In the examination system In Scotland In the 1970s? In: LSE Research Festival 2018, 2018-02-19 - 2018-02-24, London School of Economics.

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Born to Fail? How Influential was Class in the Examination System in Scotland in the 1970s?

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To this day, young people born to parents who belong to a higher social class have better educational outcomes, despite initiatives to widen participation. In an age where few young people went to university, school examinations were often the highest qualifications most young people would ever achieve. However, they were designed for only the most able of pupils and young people could choose to leave school before they even attained the age at which they could sit them. Due to historic inequality in the access to education and socio-economic factors which affect the decision to leave education, in the early 1970s, were children from certain social classes born to fail? Using quantitative analysis of the entries and results from

Scottish Ordinary and Higher grade qualifications for a sample of pupils, this paper presents evidence that after accounting for ability, social class had no effect on Ordinary grade results, however did affect the probability of a pupil sitting or passing Higher grade qualifications. This suggests that when given the opportunity, pupils from all social classes perform to the best of their abilities. However, in the presence of socio-economic barriers to education, those from lower social classes lose out. Therefore, whilst young people are not destined for failure, the intersection between social class and education means that the provision of education is insufficient if the incentives or requirements to remain in it are too weak.