

Skills Inequality, Adult Learning and Social Cohesion in the United Kingdom

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Learning Effects on Social Cohesion

Studies for various countries demonstrate that more educated people tend to show higher levels of :

- Social and political trust
- Civic and political engagement
- Democratic values
- Tolerance

and lower levels of violent crime.

(Nie *et al.*, 1996; Stubager, 2008; Hagendoorn, 1999; Emler and Frazer, 1999; Putnam, 2000). (Nie *et al.*, 1996; Stubager, 2008; Hagendoorn, 1999; Emler and Frazer, 1999; Putnam, 2000; McMahan, 1999).

Positional Effects

However, these benefits at the individual level do not necessarily translate into gains at the national level. Across countries there is no correlation between average level of skills and social trust, for instance (Norris, 2001).

- The effects of skills are often ‘positional’ rather than ‘absolute’ ie one person’s social gain through improved learning outcomes will be another’s loss through *relatively* diminished skills (Janmaat and Green, 2012; Nie et al, 2006).
- Recent research has increasingly questioned the absolute effect of education on democratic engagement and has shown that positional effects do occur for voter turnout (Burden, 2009; Tenn, 2007), political sophistication (Highton, 2009) and democratic citizenship (Persson and Oscarsson, 2010).

Skills Distribution and Social Cohesion

Much of the recent research suggests that how skills are distributed may be more important for social attitudes than average levels of skill at the societal level (Green and Janmaat, 2006; Schuller and Desjardin 2010).

Skills Distribution and Social Cohesion

Unequal distribution of skills may affect attitudes associated with social cohesion in various ways.

Indirectly:

- skills inequality and income inequality are closely correlated across countries and income inequality is a frequent cause of social conflict. More unequal incomes are associated cross-nationally with higher rates of violent crime (McMahon, 1999); lower level of public health (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and lower levels of social trust (Green, Janmaat and Cheung, 2011).

Directly:

- Skills inequality creates cultural distance between people which may make trusting more difficult (Green and Janmaat, 2012).
- Skills and income inequality create high stakes competition and higher levels of stress which is a major cause of poor health (Wilkinson, 2006) and may well make trusting more difficult.

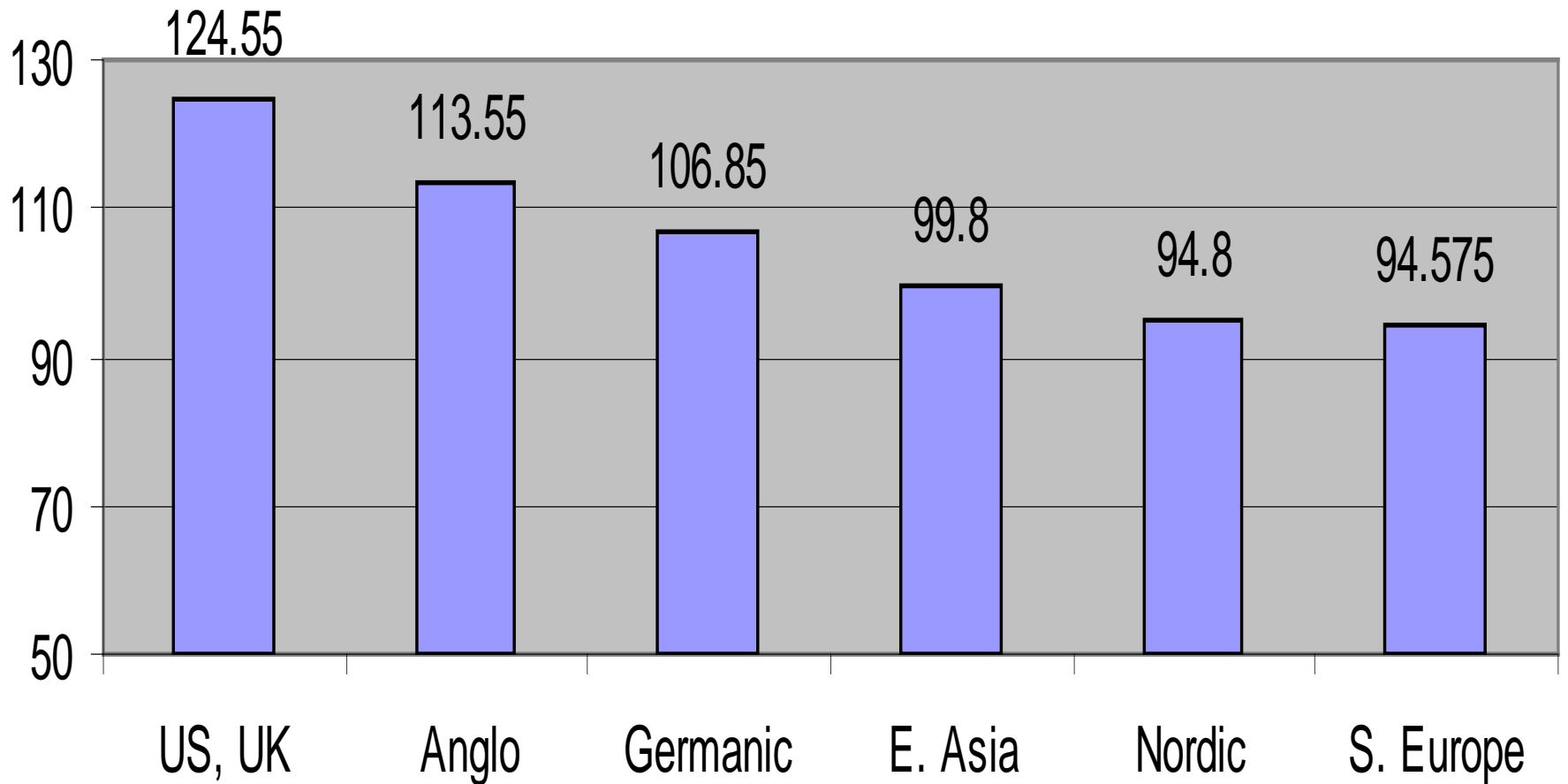
Skills Inequality and Social Cohesion in Liberal States

Skills inequality may cause particularly problems for social cohesion in ‘liberal’ societies like the UK where social cohesion relies not so much on widely shared values or the active role of the state, but on the triple foundations of market freedoms, active civil society and core beliefs in individual opportunities and rewards based on merit (Green and Janmaat, 2012).

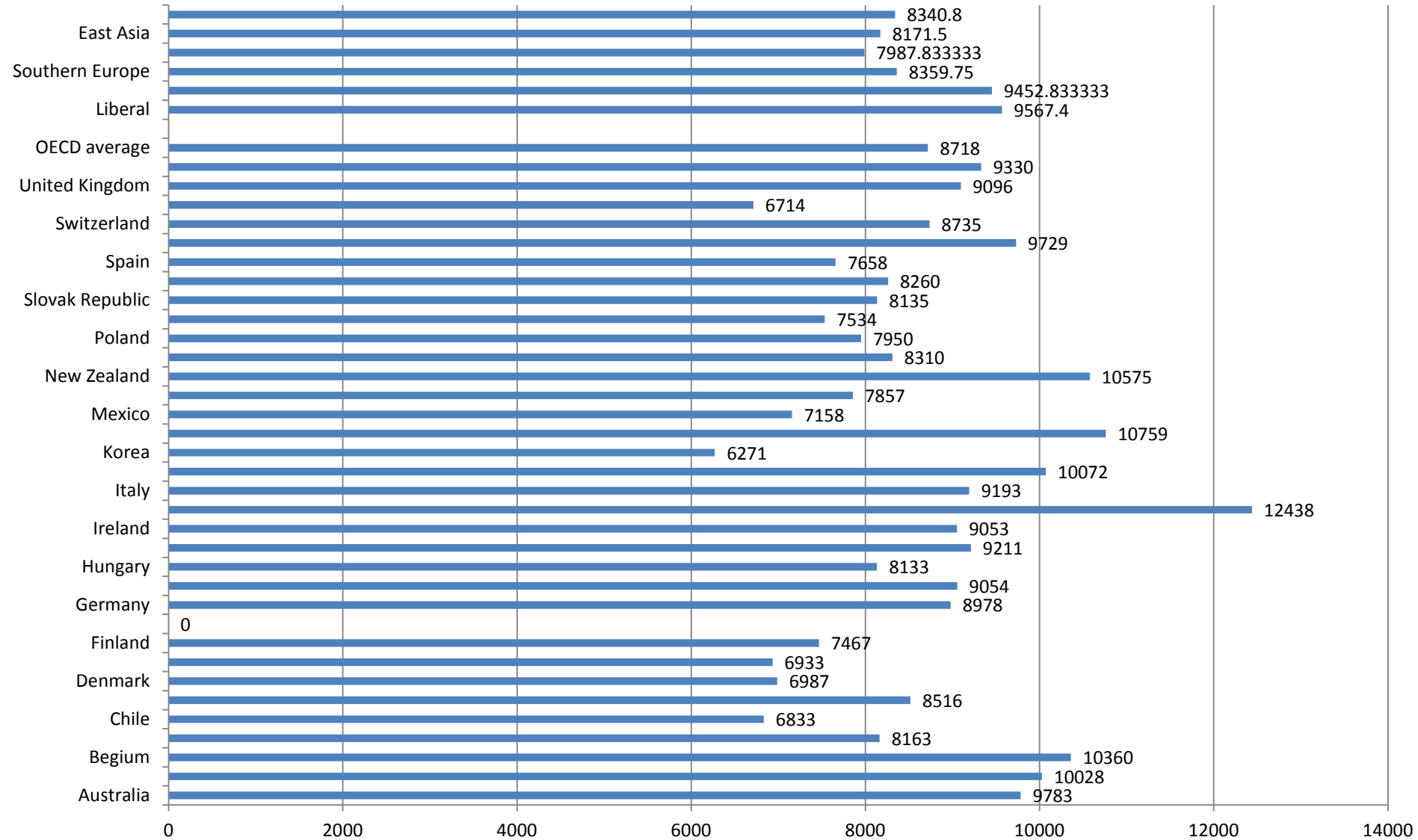
If people no longer believe that rewards are based on merit it may erode the foundations of social cohesion. In the UK:

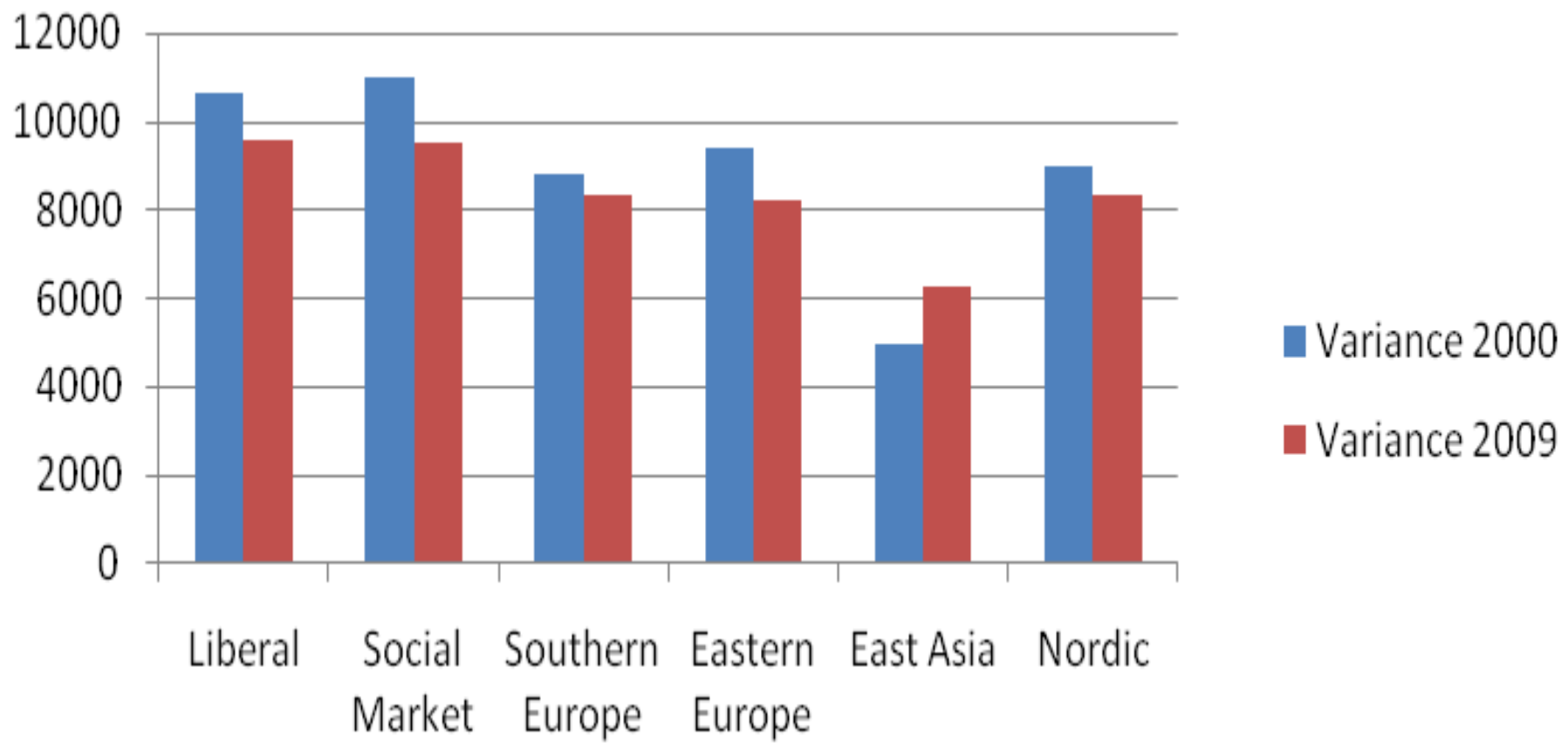
- Learning outcomes are more strongly influenced by social background than in most other countries.
- Social mobility between generations appears to be in decline (Blanden, Gregg and Machin, 2005)
- Some evidence suggests that there is a growing gap between peoples’ ideal of meritocracy and what they actually perceive to be happening.

Average Variation in Science by Country Group in PISA 2006

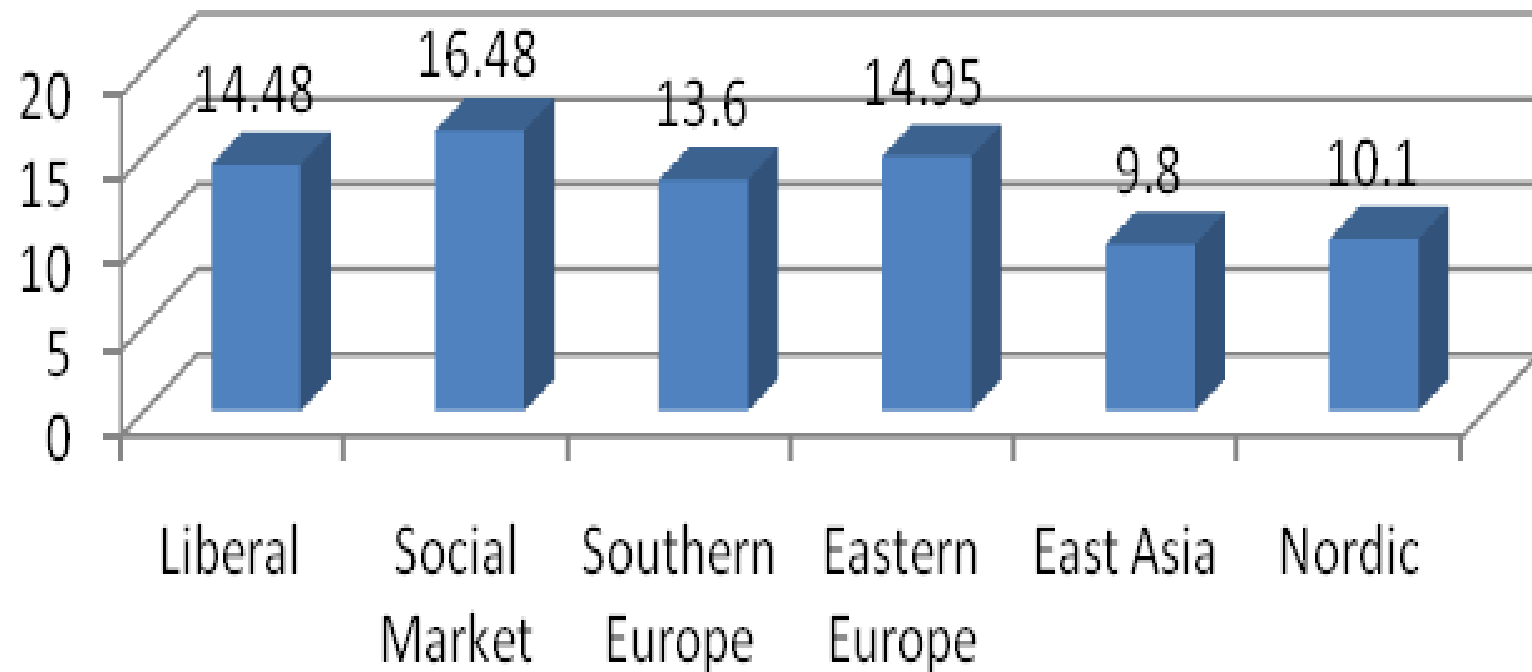


Total Variation in Student Performance Scores in Reading Literacy, PISA 2009.

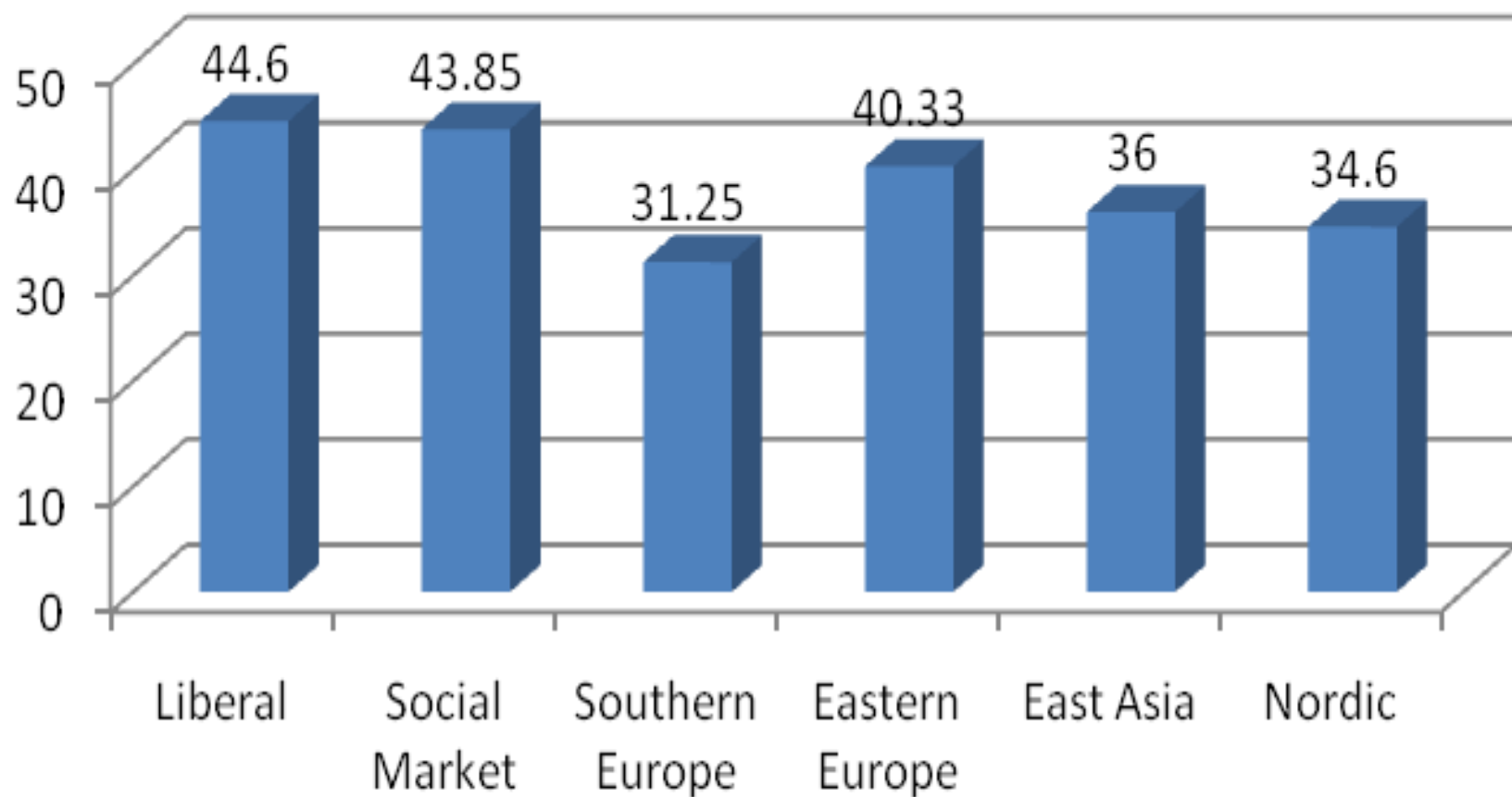


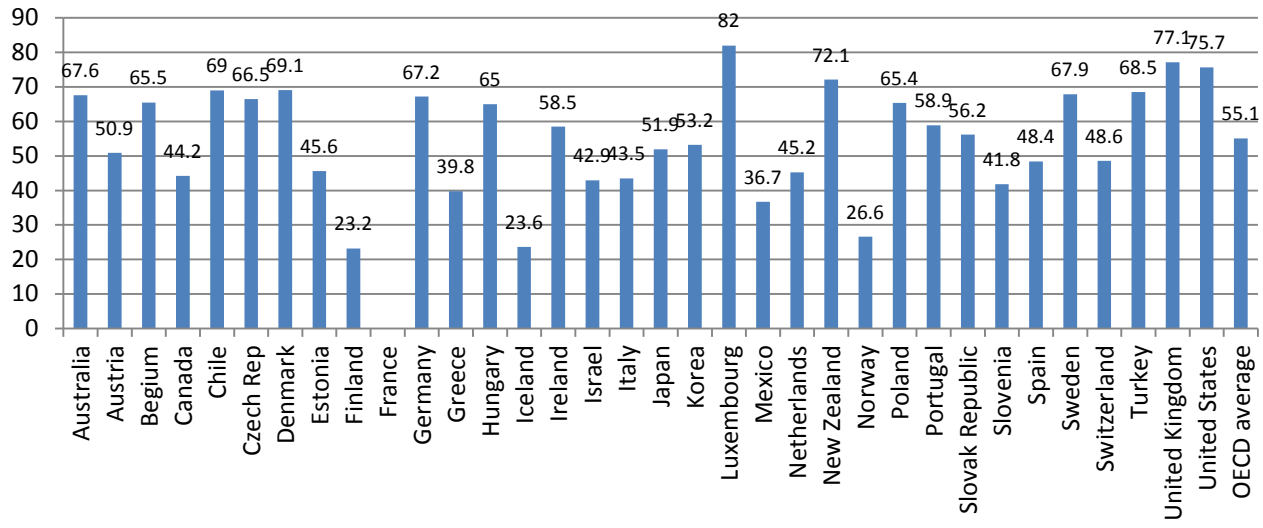


Percentage of Variation Explained by Student Background (ESCS) - 2009

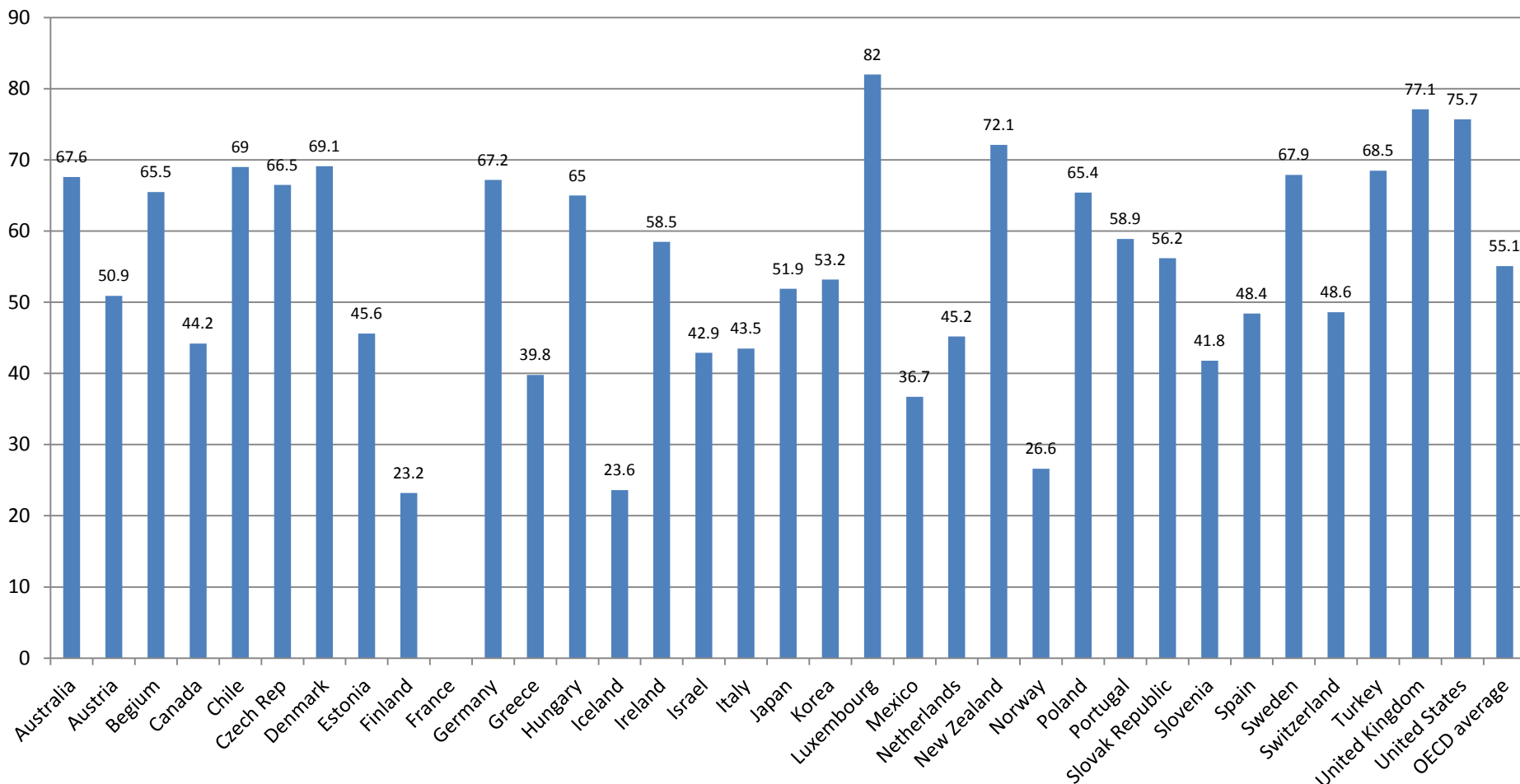


Score Point Difference Associated with a One Point Increase in Student Background (ESCS) - 2009

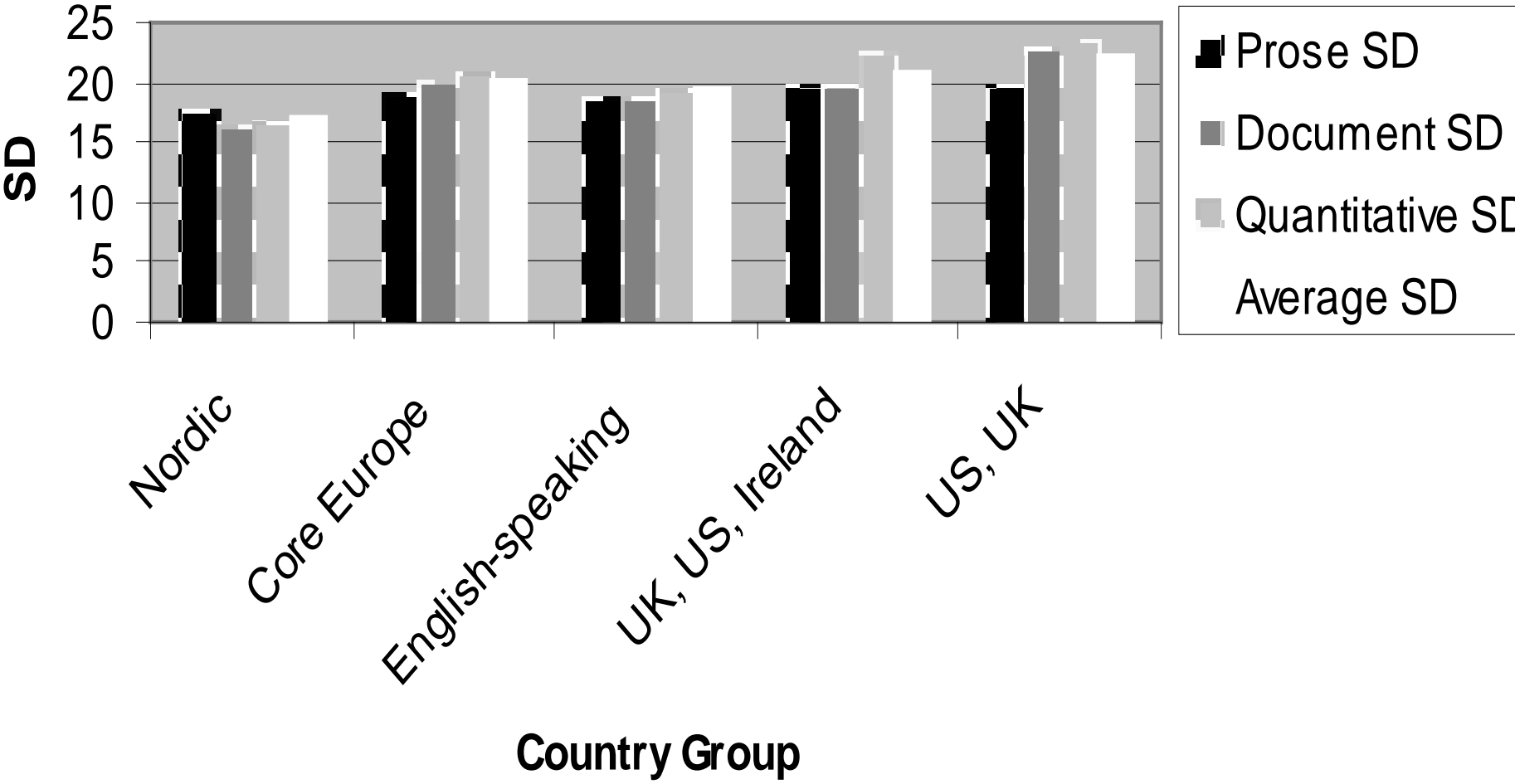




Percentage of Between-School Variation in Performance Explained by Social Intake of the School (average ESCS) - 2009

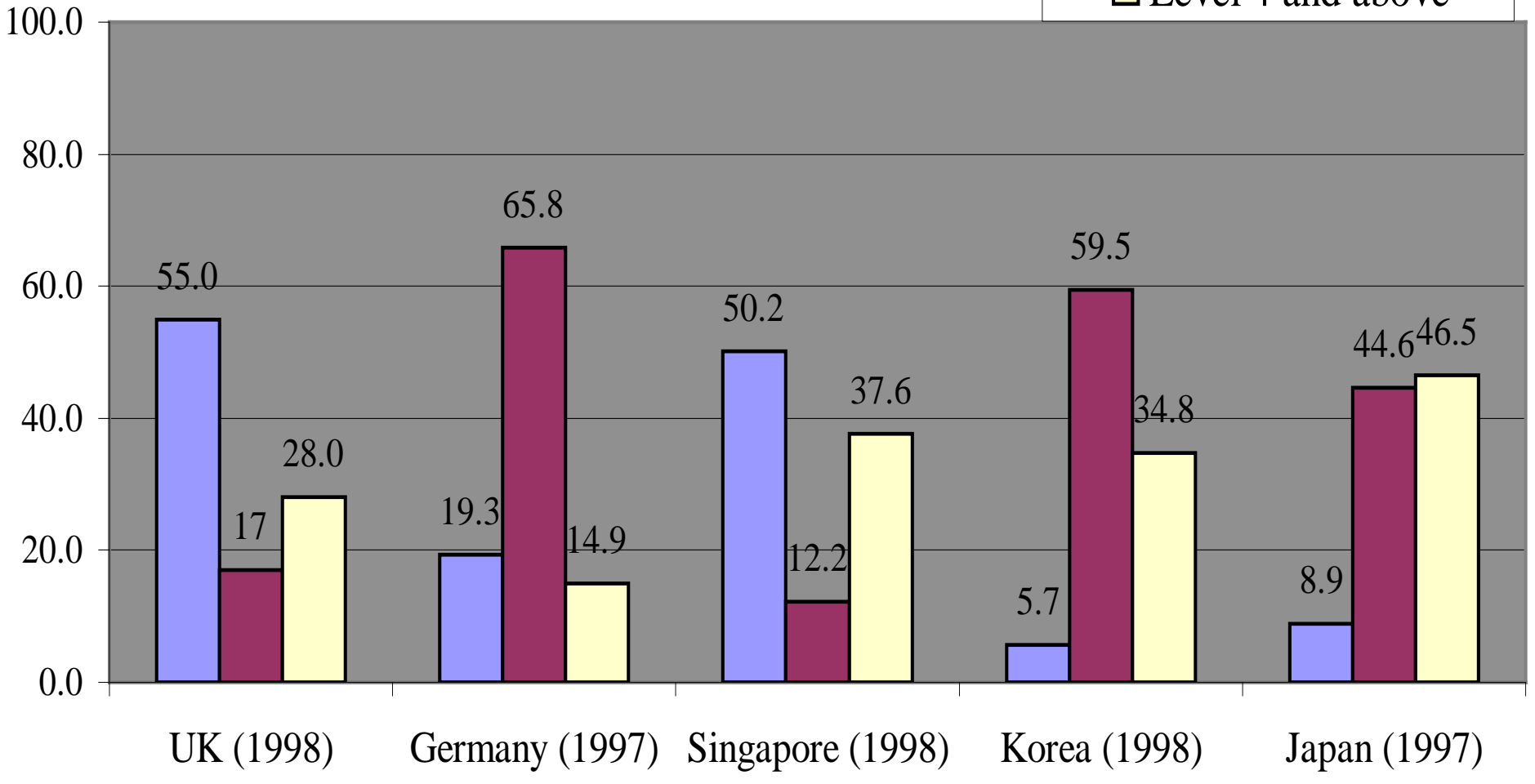


Standard Deviations for Scores for Country Groups

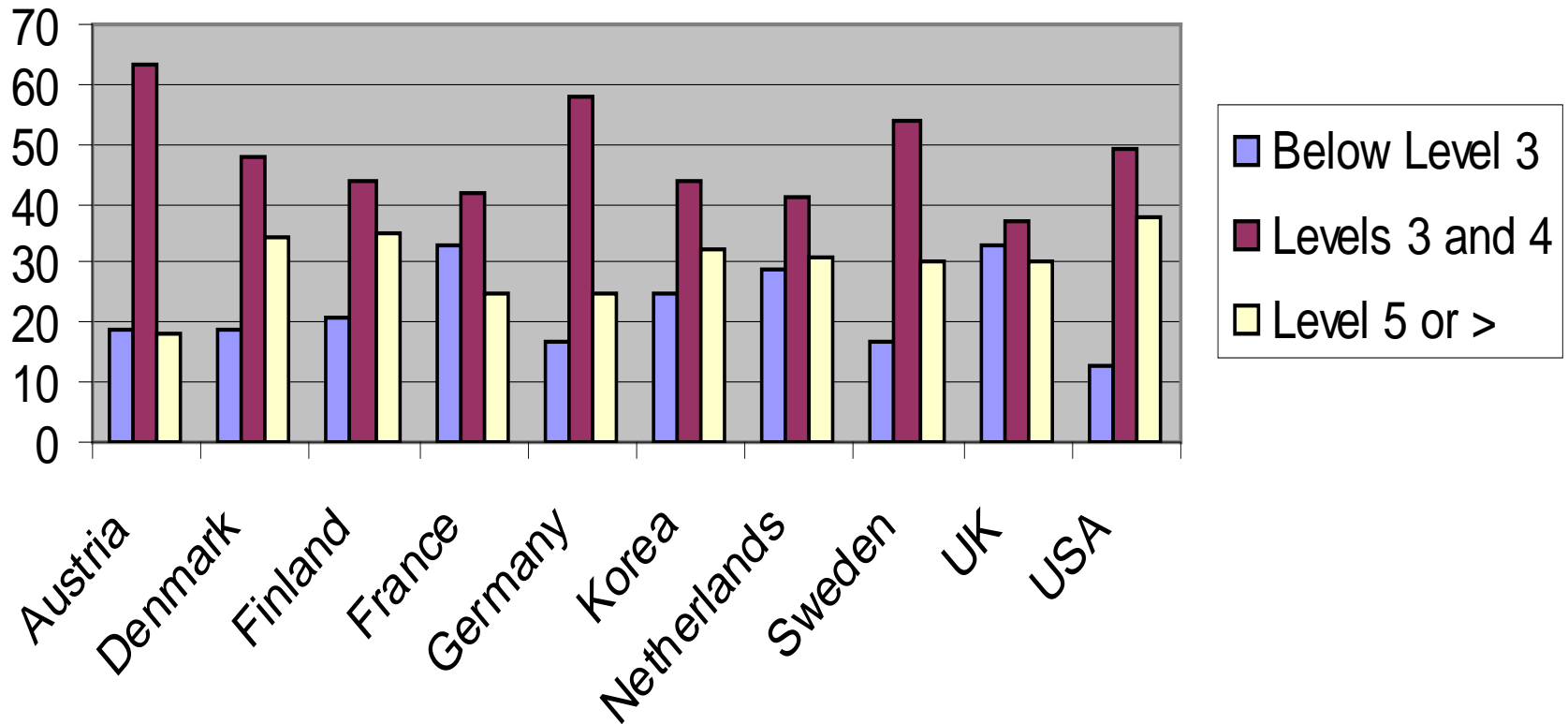


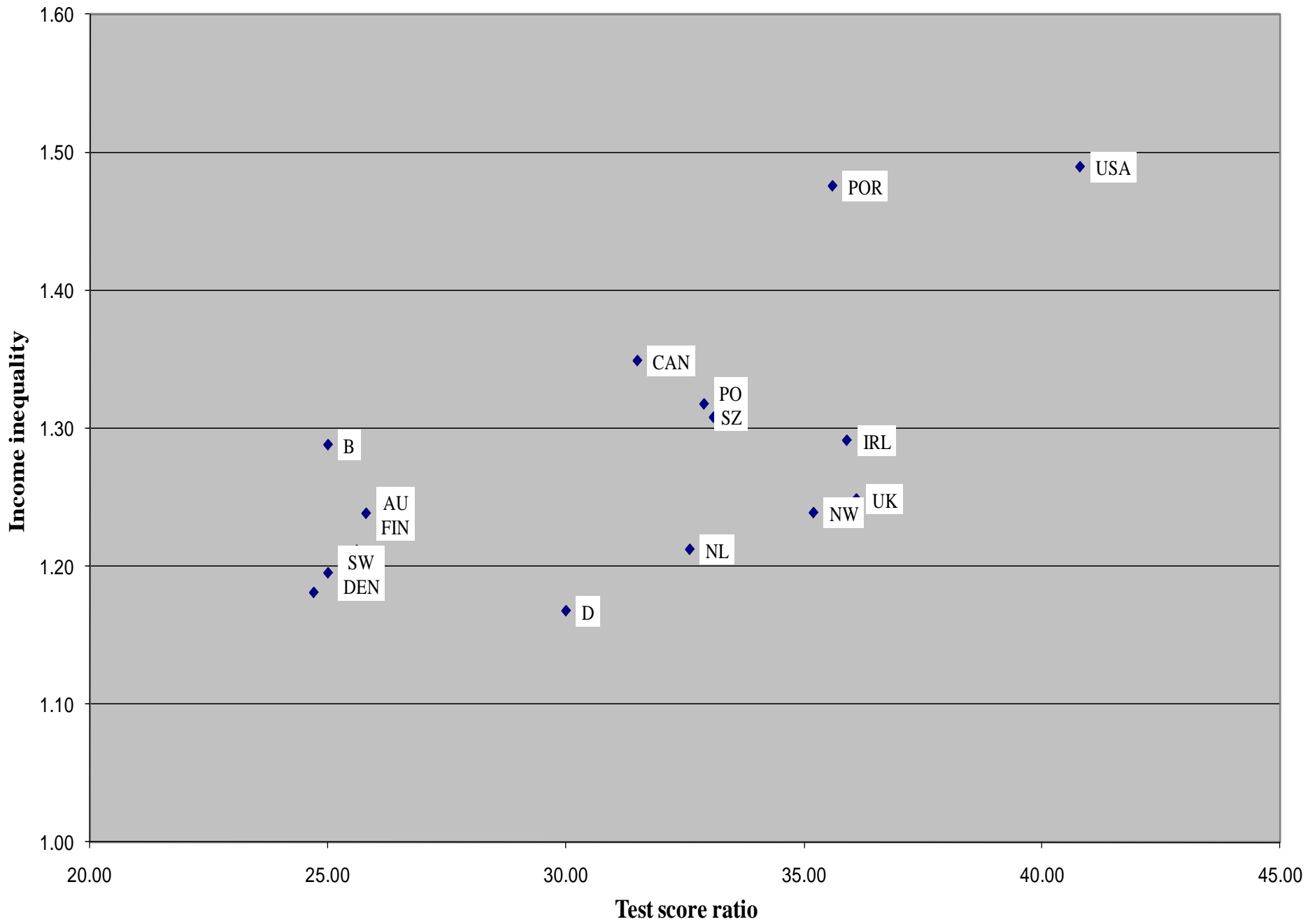
Population aged 25-29 by Highest Qualification Attained

- Below Level 3
- Level 3
- Level 4 and above



Proportion of Adults Qualified at Different Levels, 2005





Adult Learning Not Mitigating Skills Inequalities in UK

- In Britain the well educated participate 1.6 times as much as the average person and the poorly educated participate only 0.3 times as much.
- In Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States, the participation rates of both the high and low education groups are closer to the national mean (OECD, 2005 based on LFS data).
- In Britain the unemployed and inactive participate less than the national average.
- In Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden the unemployed have higher participation rates than the employed.

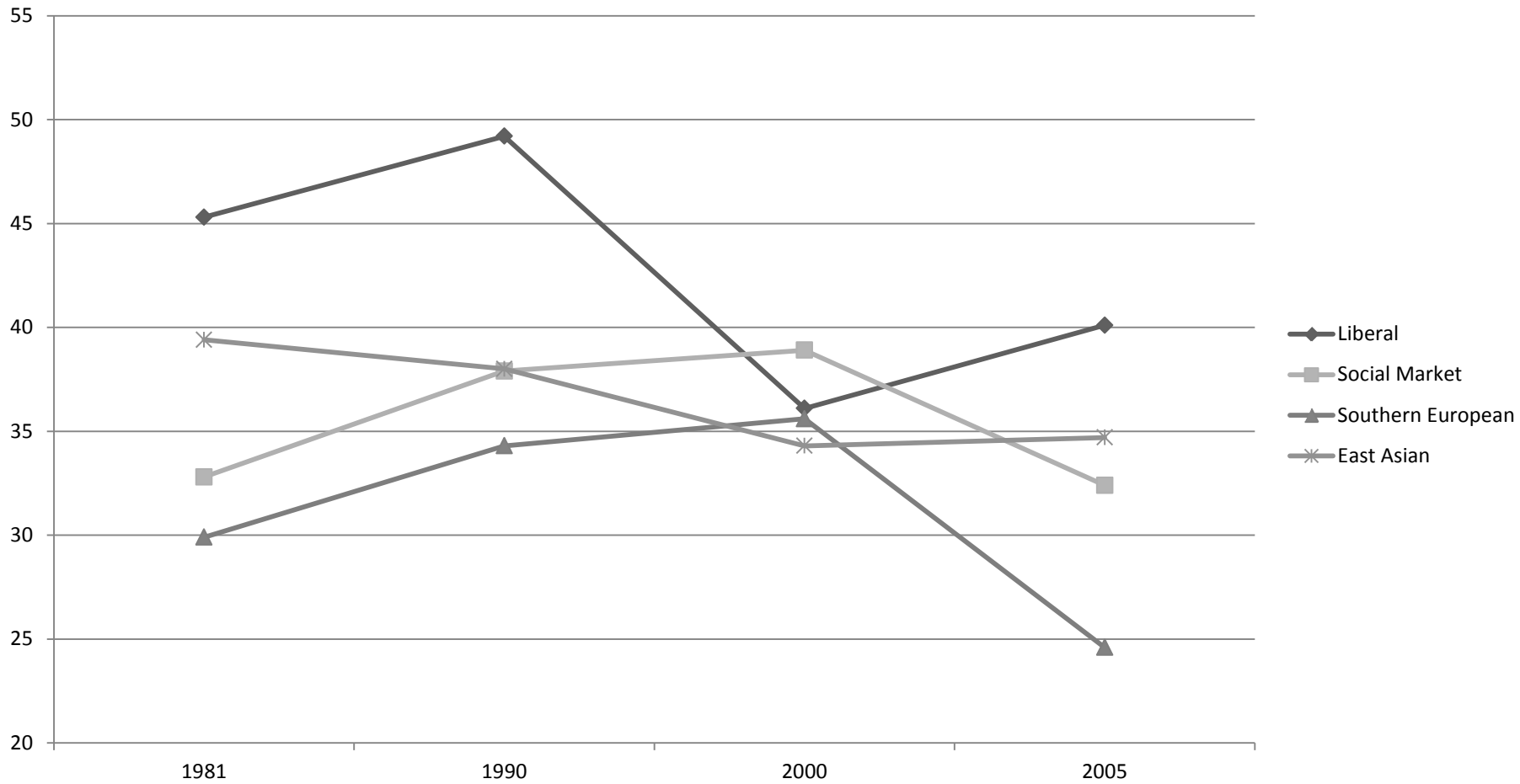
The Gap between Meritocratic Ideals and Perceptions of Reality in the UK

- British adults tend to believe that rewards should be based on merit rather than need and are relatively tolerant of income inequality.
- However, a relatively high proportion (compared with in other countries) say that ‘only the rich can attend university’ and disagree that everyone has the same chance of getting in.

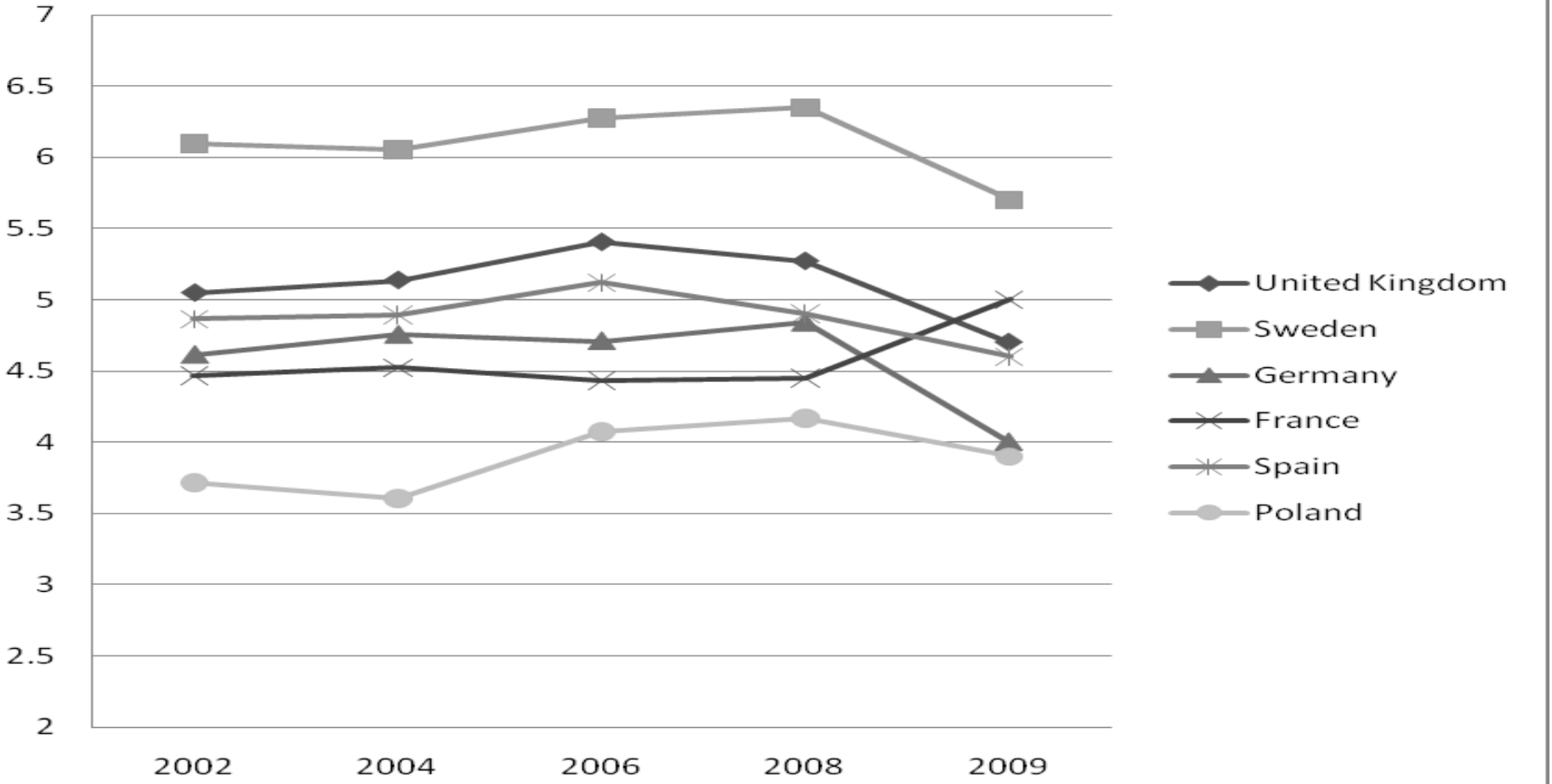
Country	Hard work / children to provide for * (ISSP 2009)	Country	Large income differences acceptable to reward talents and effort (ESS 2008)
Australia	56.4	Greece	74.7
New Zealand	54.7	Denmark	66.7
Norway	51.6	Great Britain	63.9
Sweden	47.4	Germany	60.1
Great Britain	47.0	Netherlands	57.7
Finland	44.2	Switzerland	56.4
USA	44.2	Belgium	55.8
Japan	39.8	Cyprus	55.2
Iceland	39.2	Israel	54.5
Portugal	35.4	Spain	52.9
South Korea	30.3	Norway	52.6
Slovenia	28.7	France	51.5
Denmark	28.2	Sweden	49.0
Austria	22.9	Portugal	48.9
Switzerland	21.9	Slovenia	36.6
France	19.9	Finland	27.5
Belgium	19.4		
Spain	16.2		
Germany	10.8		
Israel	5.7		

Country	Only the rich can afford the cost of attending university (ISSP 2009)	Country	People have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background (ISSP 2009)
	Disagree		
Norway	85.6	Germany	44.3
Denmark	83.9	France	41.6
Finland	80.9	Portugal	38.8
Iceland	73.9	Spain	29.1
New Zealand	66.6	Great Britain	28.6
Spain	66.5	Austria	26.8
Austria	66.4	Australia	25.2
Sweden	64.7	South Korea	23.3
Switzerland	64.6	USA	23.3
USA	61.4	Belgium	22
Belgium	52.4	Denmark	21.2
Australia	51.1	New Zealand	19.2
Cyprus	49.3	Japan	18.9
Great Britain	48.3	Israel	18.7
Germany	47.5	Switzerland	18.2
Japan	47	Iceland	17.6
Portugal	39.9	Finland	17.2
Israel	39.4	Sweden	14.8
South Korea	27.2	Cyprus	13.6
France	25.9	Norway	10.6

Trends in Social Trust

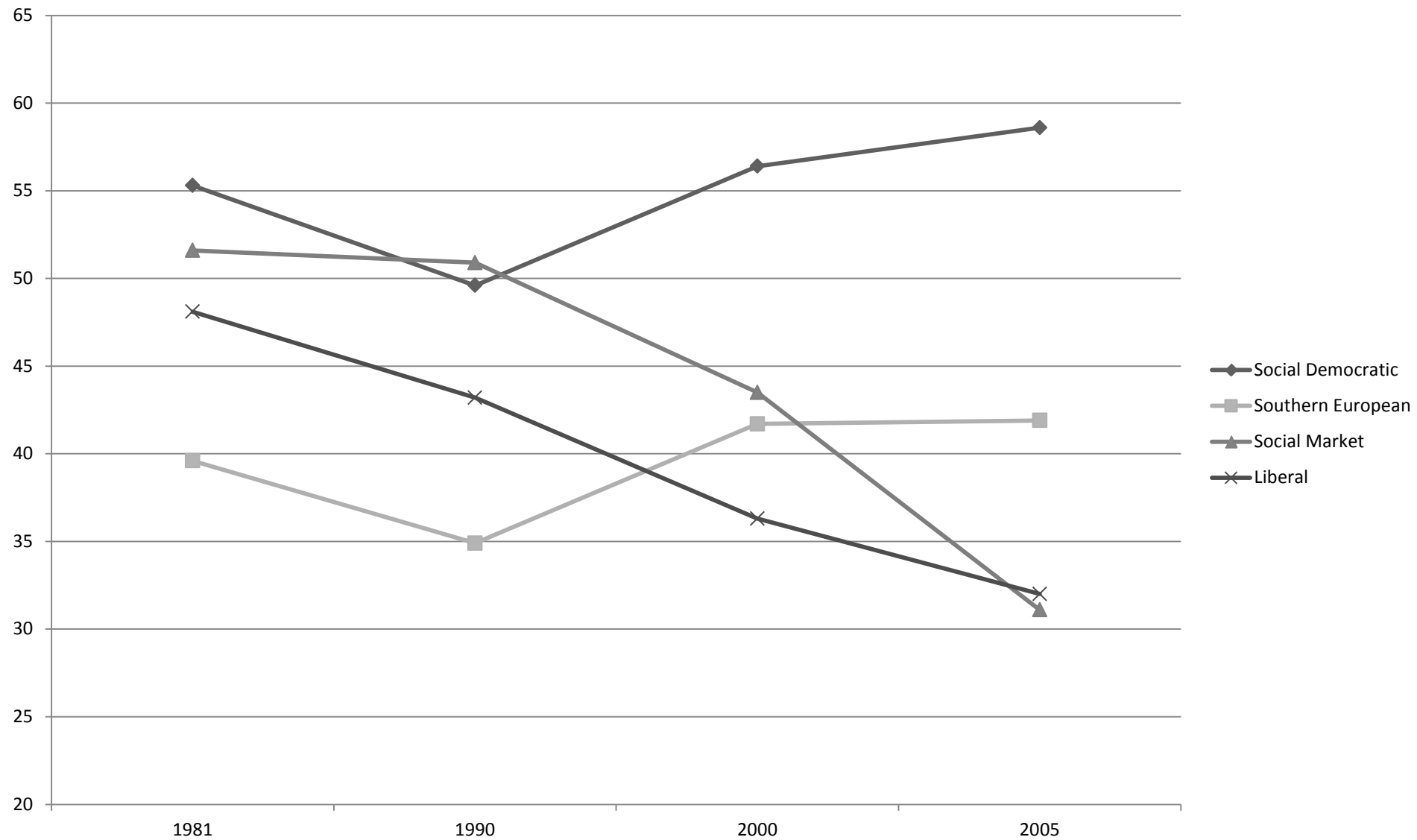


Trends in Social Trust (mean of 0-10 scale)

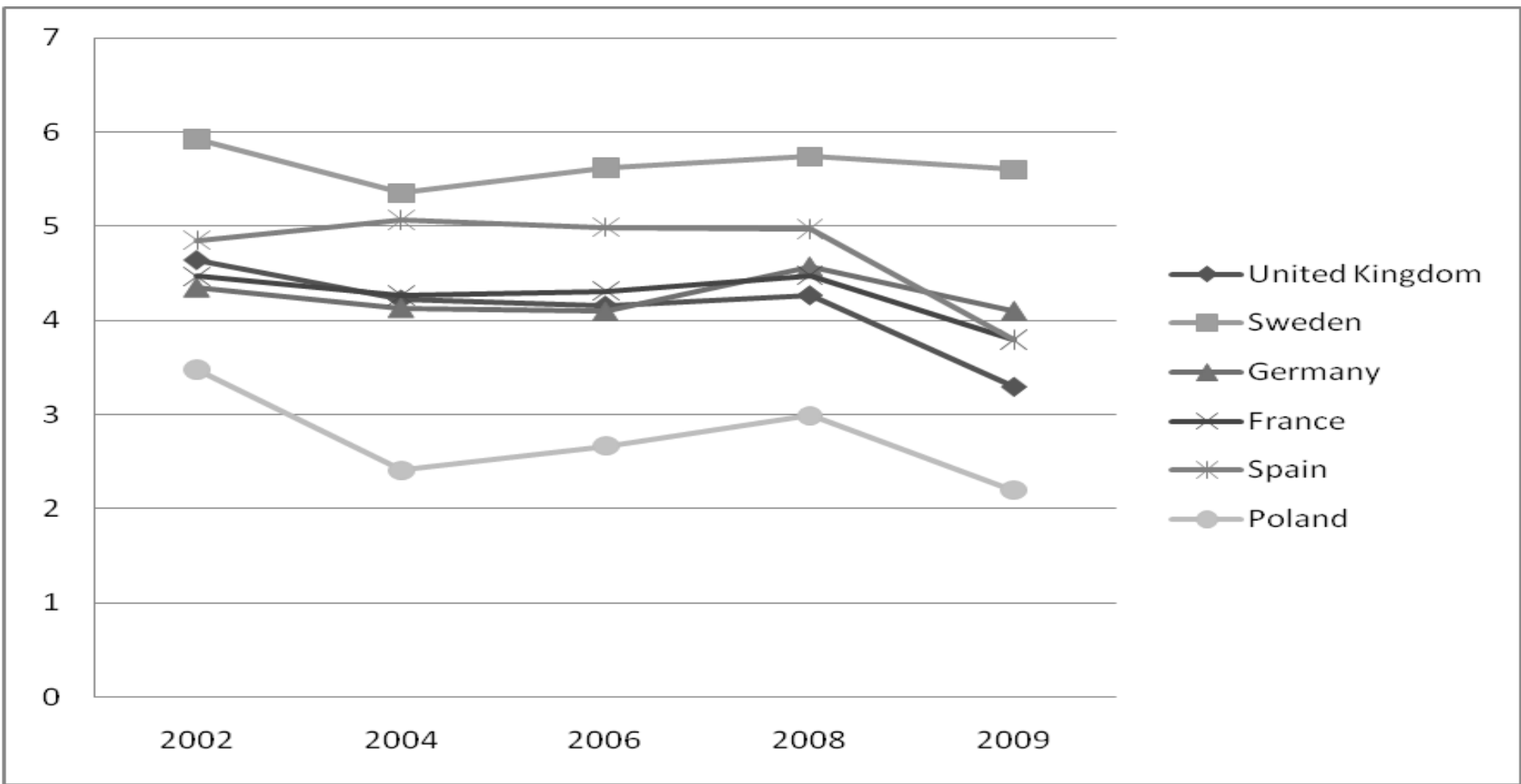


Source: European Social Survey (ESS) rounds 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008 and the Eurobarometer 72.1 (Sept-Oct 2009).

Trends in Political Trust



Trends in Political Trust (trust in parliament; mean of 0-10 scale)



Sources: European Social Survey and Eurobarometer (see notes for Figure 2).

Conclusion

Precipitous declines in trust and faith in opportunities and meritocratic rewards are possibly the biggest threat to social cohesion in the UK.

Education can play a major role in equalising opportunities and counteracting the erosion of core beliefs which hold society together. But at the moment it is not doing this .

Policy needs to concern itself not only with raising average levels of skills but equally about how lifelong learning systems spread skills around.