

Disability, Gender and Social Class in Education: Making the Connections in European HE

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Structure of the Presentation

- Massive expansion of HE participation across Europe over past two decades
- But major social inequalities remain in patterns of participation
- Administrative data are used to provide an understanding of the relationship between key variables, including gender, social class and disability.
- Qualitative data provide insight into the way in which complex identity plays out on people's lived experiences.

Is it still relevant to examine traditional social variables (e.g. social class, disability and gender) to understand patterns of inequality?

Theorists of 'late modernity' suggest that individuals create their own social identity. Defining aspects of identity may change over time.

Increasingly everyone has to choose between different options, including as to which group or subculture one wants to be identified with. In fact one has to choose and change one's social identity as well and take the risks in doing so. (Beck 1992:88)

Increasingly recognised that identity shifts over time
- for example, disability has been described as ‘the ultimate post-modern category’

*Considering the range of impairments under the disability umbrella; considering the different ways in which they impact on individuals and groups over a lifetime; considering the intersection of disability with other axes of inequality; and considering the challenges which impairment issues to the notion of embodiment, we believe it could be argued that disability is the ultimate post-modern concept.
(Corker & Shakespeare, 2002: 15)*

Counter-arguments: inequality is rising within most European countries – extremely important to chart inequalities

Despite their limitations, traditional social categories (gender, social class, disability) are still important – and interlinked

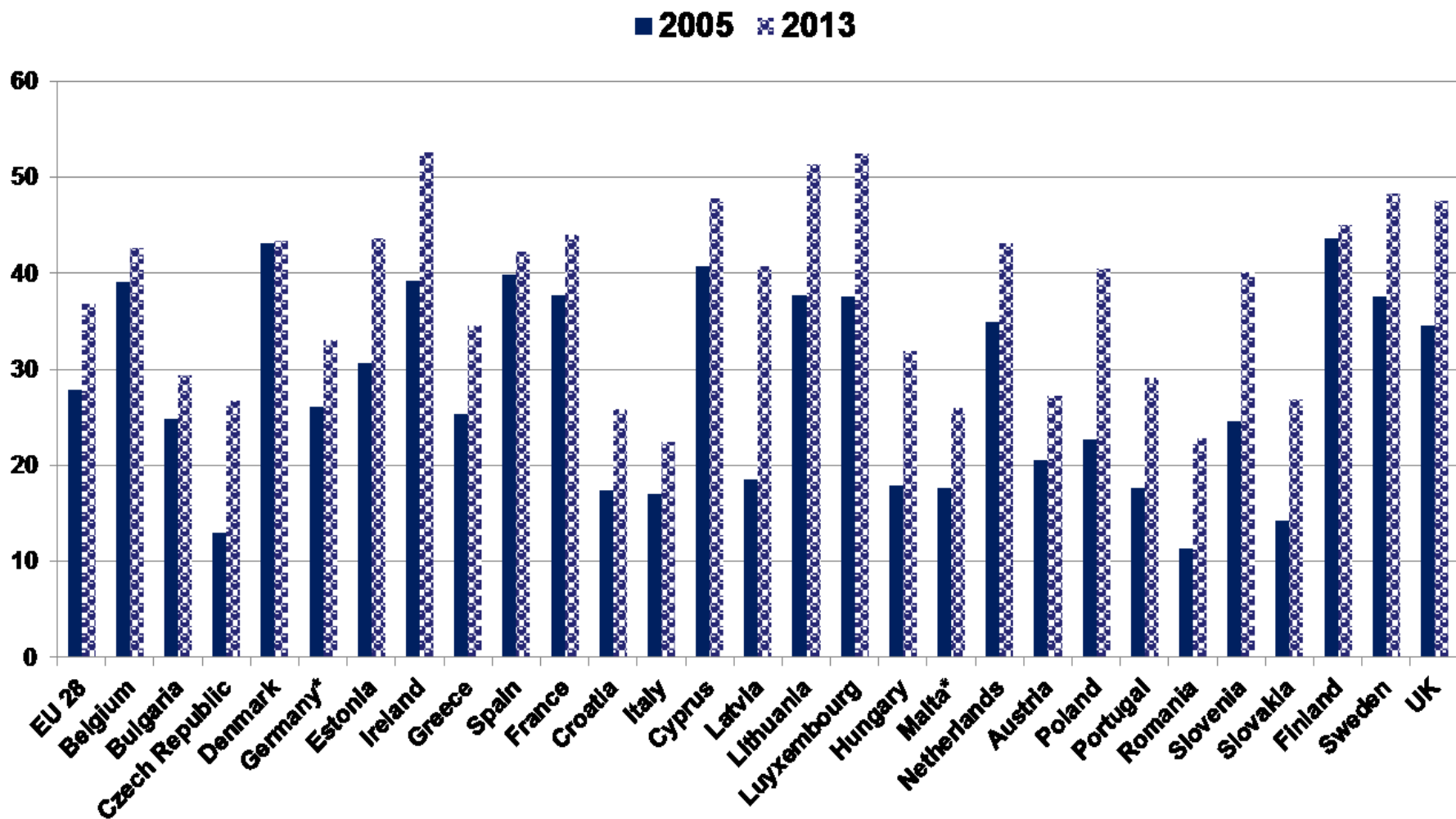
Social class continues to be major determinant of individual life-chances. Individuals have only limited room for manoeuvre and negotiation – and there are always inter-sections with other variables.

The individualism which is assumed in a great deal of theorising on subjectivity is the product of, and in the interests of, privileged groups in very specific national and historical circumstances... Concepts of individualism legitimate powerful groups and render other groups unworthy of the designation 'individual'. (Skeggs, 1997: 163)

What can we learn from official statistics about patterns of participation and the relationship between gender, social class and disability?

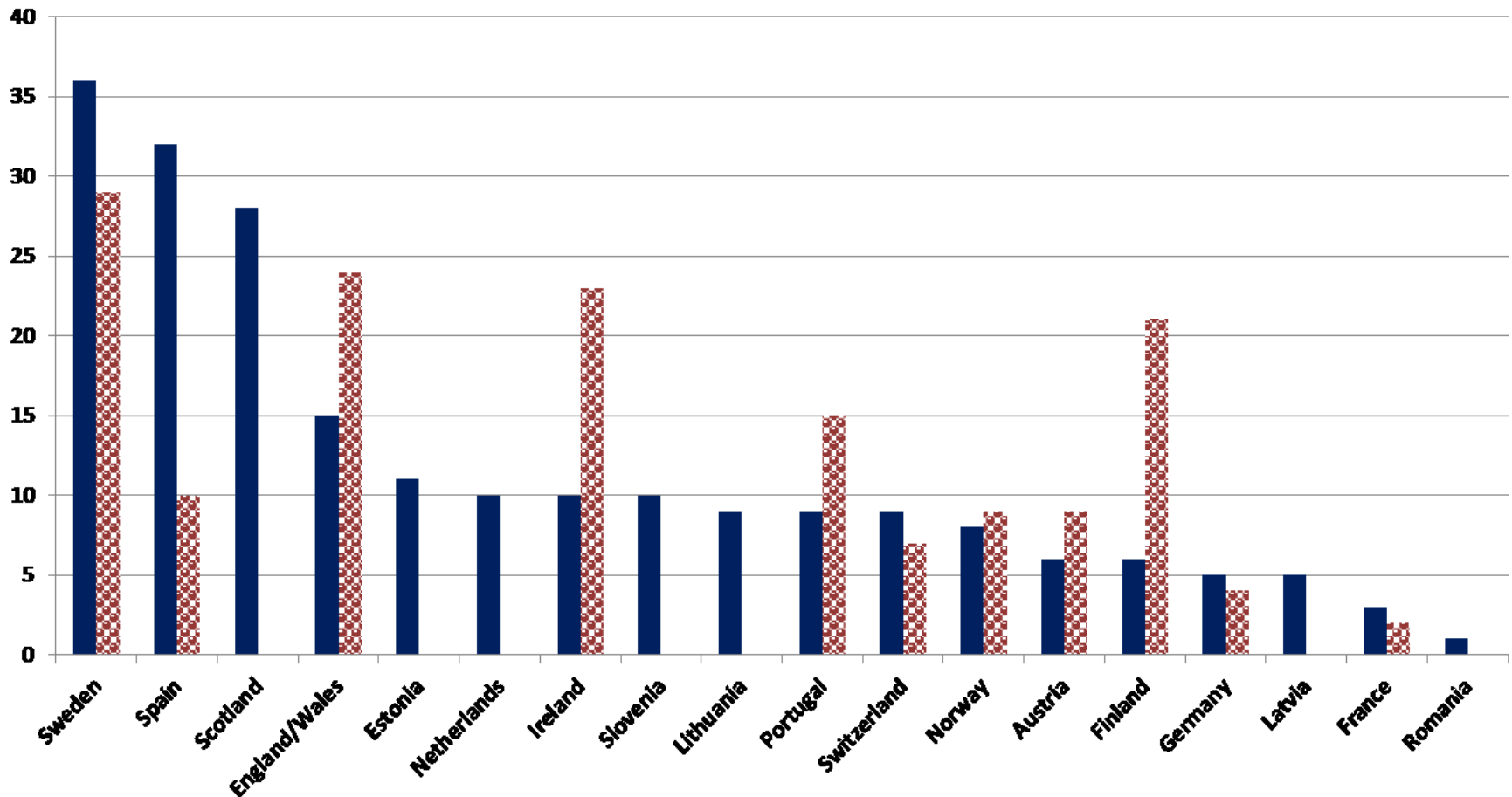
Major expansion of HE across Europe

Changes in the proportion of 30-34 year olds with tertiary education in EU28 countries between 2005 and 2013



Proportion of students in European countries entering university through non-traditional routes

■ 2005-08 ■ 2008-11



Entry routes to higher education in Germany by all students and those from low parental education background, 2010

	All students	Students from low education background ¹
General academic track upper secondary certificate (allgemeine Hochschulreife)	82.7%	72.2%
Upper secondary certificate with limited entry to HE based on subject (fachgebundene Hochschulreife)	3.4%	5.8%
Upper secondary certificate with limited entry to HE based on subject (Fachhochschulereife)	13.1%	18.9%
Entry to HE based on accreditation of prior learning, work experience and/or special examination	0.8%	3.1%
	100%	100%

Access to higher education in Germany

Highly structured system with early division between academic and vocational routes.

Academic routes dominated by those from middle class backgrounds.

Vocational routes dominated by those from working class backgrounds

Key informant in ESRC project:

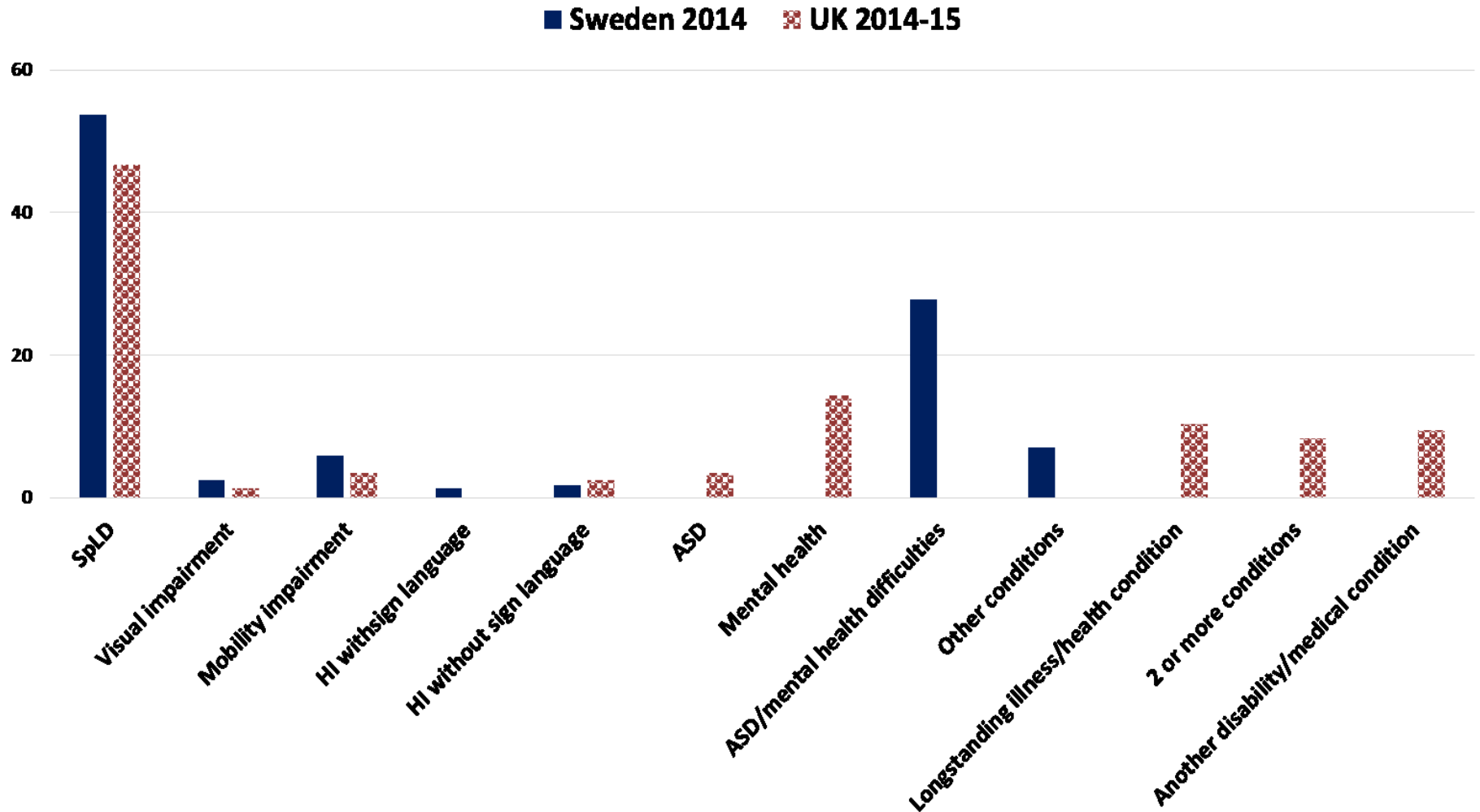
The major problem for Germany is that it's very socially selective at the door. ... One ... poster which was used in a student protest in Germany was ... 'I want different parents'. And it was to do with the fact that your parents actually pretty much determine a lot of your chances within the education system.

(Key Informant, Germany)

Higher Education in Scotland: Disability, Social Class & Gender

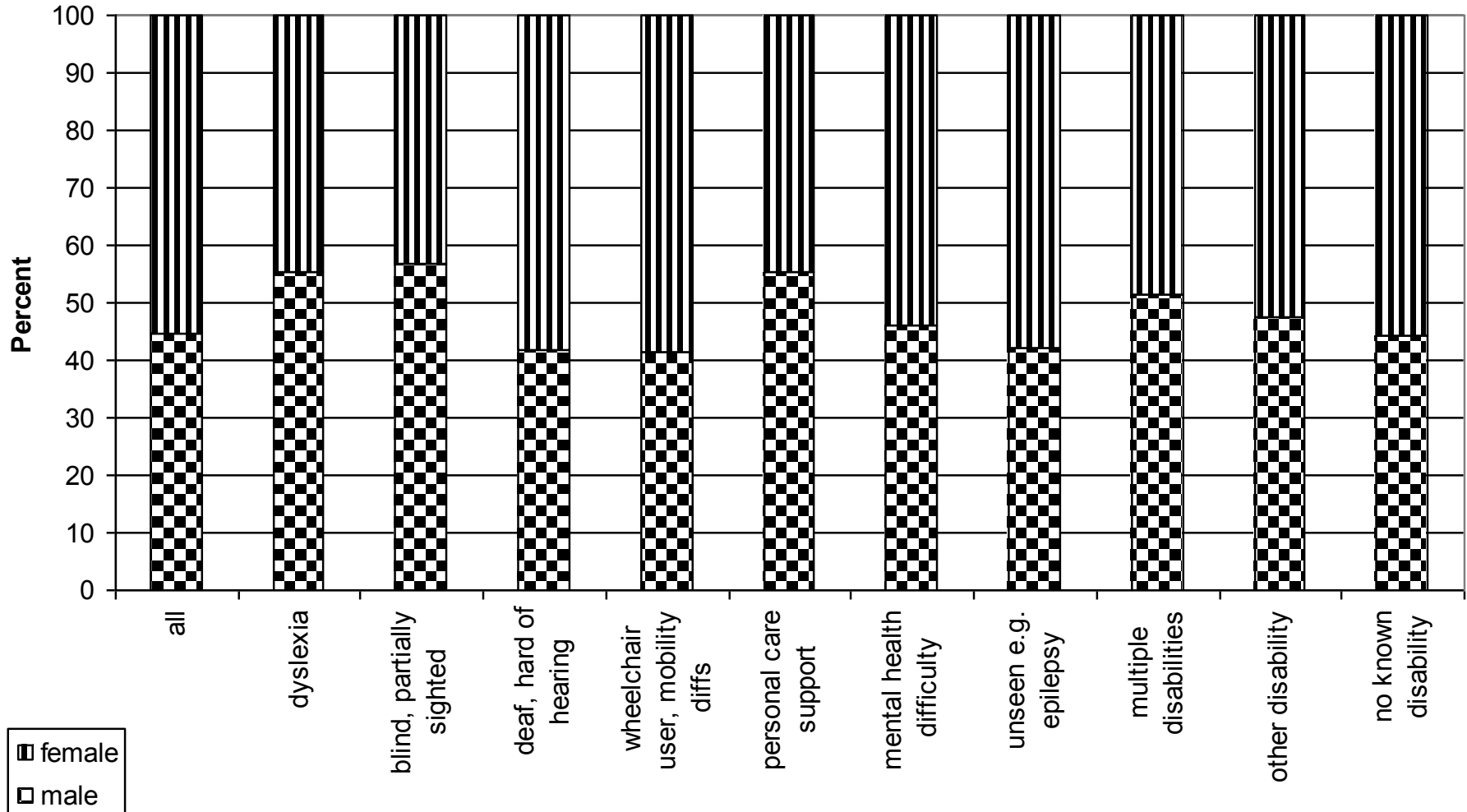
- Major expansion of HE sector in general – from 10% of population in 1980s to 40% of population at present time
- Expansion in proportion of disabled students in total student population – from 2% of total in 1995 to 9% of total in 2017
- Strong links between gender, disability and social class
- Dyslexia biggest & fastest growing category (accounts for more than half of all disabled students)
- Middle class men predominate in this group

Type of impairment as percentage of all disabled students, Sweden and UK



First year, full-time, UK domiciled undergraduates (Scotland and England only) by gender and disability (N=266,494)

Men predominate in dyslexia category – by far the largest. Different patterns of participation by gender in HE compared with schools



Also strong links between disability and social class – but contrasting patterns between school and university

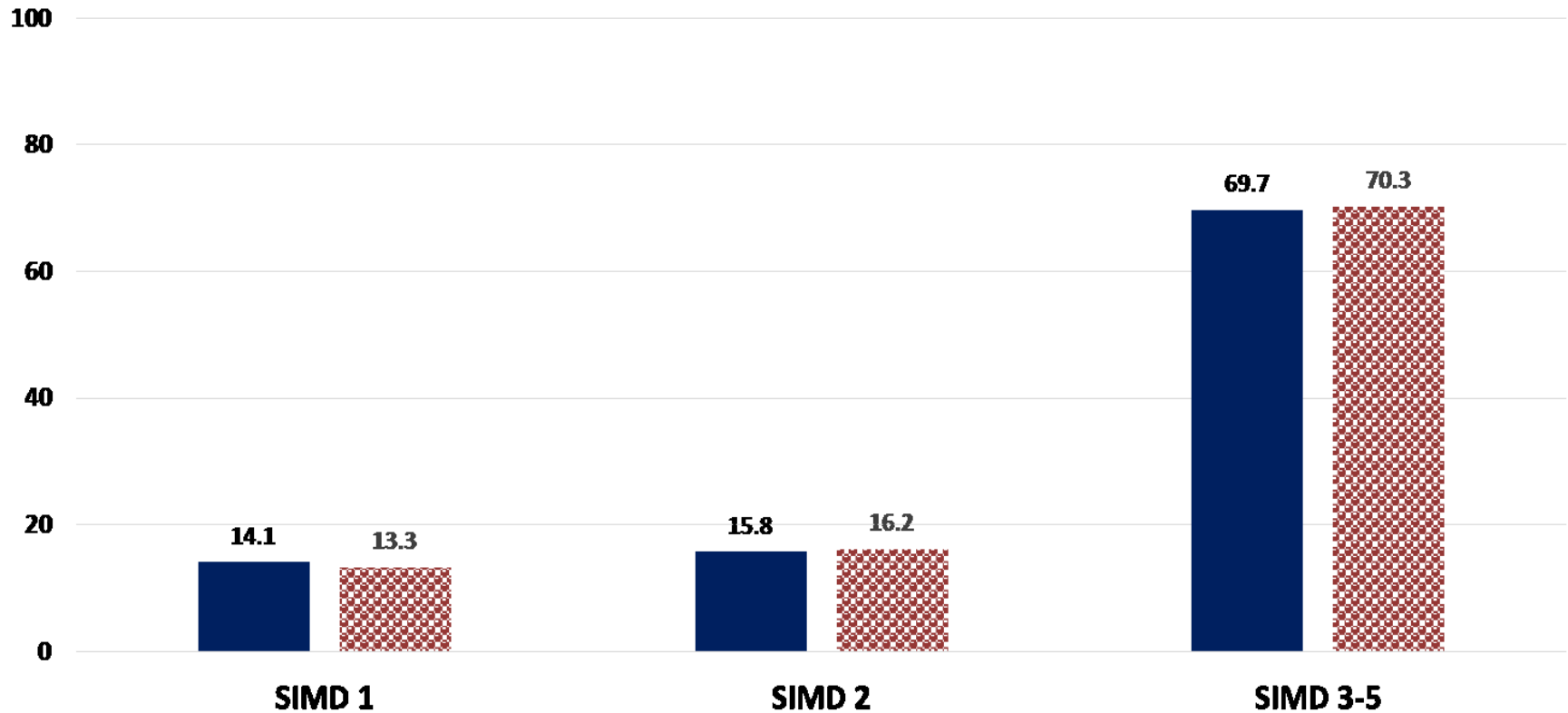
Disabled students are more likely to come from professional/managerial backgrounds than non-disabled students (opposite in schools)

Type of impairment also matters- significant majority (60%) of disabled students have diagnosis of dyslexia – and are predominantly male and middle class

Disabled and non-disabled students by social deprivation.

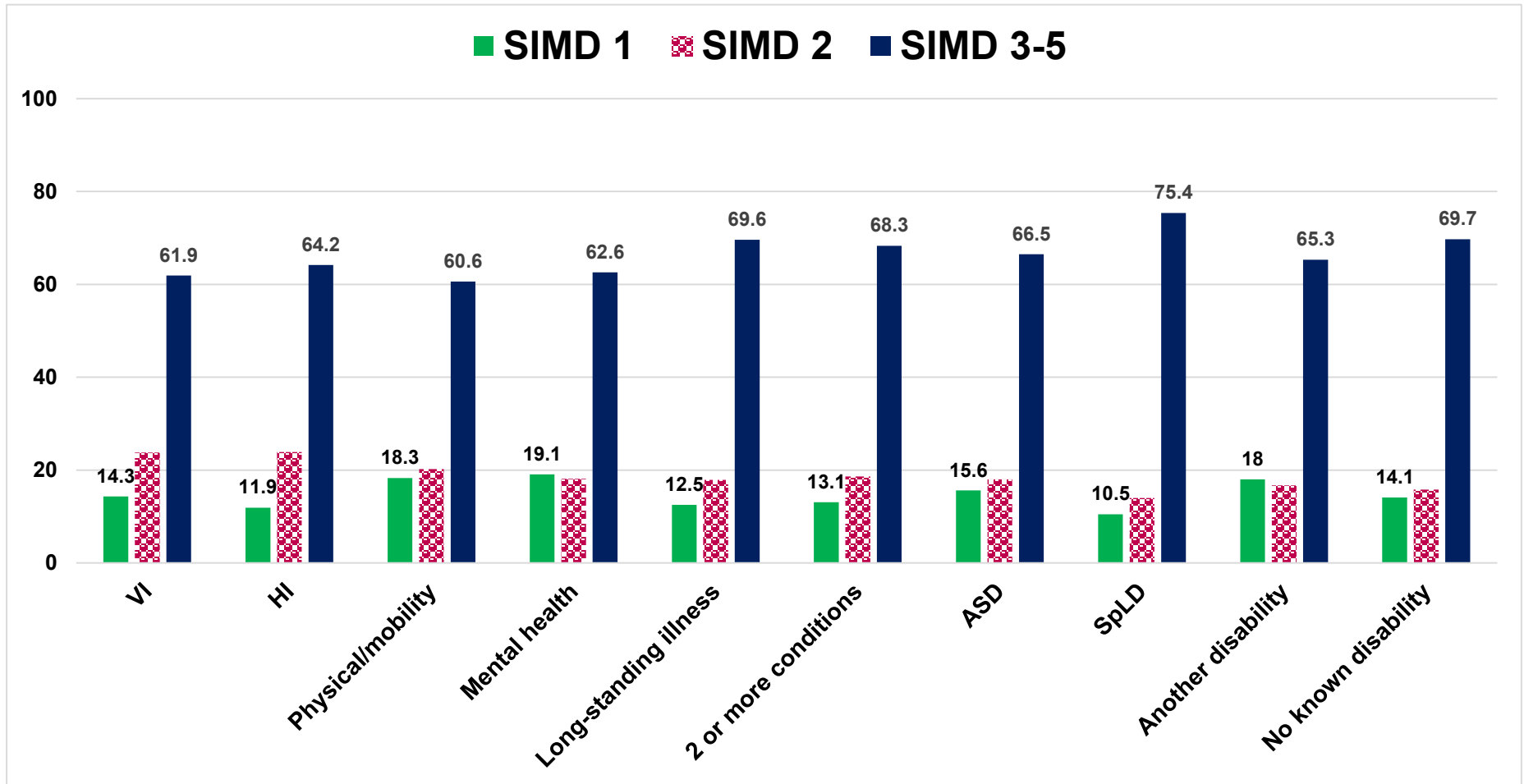
SIMD1 -= most deprived neighbourhoods

■ Non-disabled ■ Disabled



Disabled students by type of impairment and social deprivation.

Dyslexic students (SpLD) are more socially advantaged than others



Qualitative data

- Different impairments lead to different educational experiences and different outcomes
- Differences in gender social class background also play an important role
- Social advantage does not always outweigh negative impact of disability

School students and the inter-section of disability, gender and social class

Leah is a full-time mum and a BSL user. She was diagnosed with hearing loss when she was a toddler. She lives in a peripheral estate in an urban area of high social deprivation with her partner and 18 month old baby daughter, who are also deaf. Her parents and siblings are hearing and she communicates with them orally, although she is most comfortable using BSL.

Leah spent most of her school career in schools for the deaf since her mum believed that a mainstream school would not be suitable for her. However, she was unhappy with the teachers' low expectations, became frustrated and disengaged. After two years at the secondary school for the deaf, Leah moved to a mainstream high school with a resource base. There she had full-time support from teachers of the deaf who also acted as interpreters and was happy to be given more challenging work.

In her fourth year, Leah made a sudden decision to leave school without seeking advice and enrolled at a local college where she completed a vocational course in Beauty Therapy. She described the course as enjoyable, although it had been chosen 'at random'. With hindsight, she thinks she would have benefited from more career guidance before she left school.

At the time of her interview, both Leah and her partner were unemployed and were having great difficulty finding work.

The impact of social background on the educational experiences of deaf students

*'the social networks and advocacy power of their parents were closely related to their **socio-economic status**. They played a significant role in shaping the young people's experiences of school education, as well as their post-school journeys'* (Fordyce, et al, 2013, p.113)

Issues and challenges

Across Europe, major expansion of higher education participation – but traditional divisions remain associated with social class, disability and gender

There has recently been a reduction in some widening access programmes – particularly in countries like Sweden which were traditionally world-leaders.

Comparisons across Europe are difficult because systems differ and key social variables are understood differently.

Issues and challenges continued

We need much more inter-sectional analysis -
Indicators that only focus on one characteristic may leave out other factors that are important in ensuring equal access, relevant support and fair outcomes for all disabled school and HE students

Quantitative data are useful in showing general trends but we also need qualitative data to understand the experiences of disabled students and the differences between different groups in relation to type of impairment, gender and social class