

Examiner guidelines, SOS4100, Spring 2022

General information

The exam is a six-hour school exam on a computer. Students do not have access to any tools, except a dictionary. The exam is given in English. Students may answer in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish or English.

Grading

The exam consists of three parts. Each part should be graded separately and weighted equally. The final grade is the (rounded) mean of the three parts.

In practice, this means that after setting the grade for each part, you must calculate the final grade. This is easily done by treating the letter grades as corresponding to numbers:

Letter grade	F	E	D	C	B	A
Number	1	2	3	4	5	6

Here are some examples of grades to illustrate the procedure:

	Part 1		Part 2		Part 3		Final grade	
	Letter grade	Number	Letter grade	Number	Letter grade	Number	Mean of numbers	Letter grade
Student 1	A	6	C	4	A	6	5.33	B
Student 2	B	5	F	1	D	3	3.00	D
Student 3	B	5	C	4	B	5	4.67	B
Student 4	E	2	D	3	F	1	2.00	E
Student 5	F	1	F	1	E	2	1.33	F
Student 6	B	5	A	6	A	6	5.67	A

Part 1 – multiple choice

The first part of the exam intends to test broad knowledge and reasoning on core topics, concepts, theories, and findings.

Grading this part is fairly straightforward. There are 12 multiple choice questions. Each correct answer gives one point. There are no deductions for wrong answers. The corresponding letter grades are shown in the table below. The calculation of points should be done automatically in Inspira. Please note that we have previously experienced errors in multiple choice questions (for instance, if the person setting up the exam accidentally indicates the wrong correct answer), so please do a check to see if everything is in order (e.g. correct answers in the system correspond to the correct answers you will be given).

The questions and answers are not provided here, as this document will be made available, and we may wish to re-use some questions some time.

Letter grade	F	E	D	C	B	A
Correct answers	0-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10	11-12

Part 2 – Concept definition and explanation

Students are presented with four key concepts from the course. They must choose two of them to define and explain. This is intended to test their understanding of core concepts.

General expectations

The central point is whether the student shows a solid understanding of the concepts.

We do not expect students to be able to reproduce definitions verbatim from syllabus texts (in fact, some definitions might vary from one text to another), but they should be able to give a reasonably accurate and well-formulated definition of the chosen concepts.

They are also expected to be able to explain the concept in their own words. This can be done in many ways, and may require explaining nuances, different sub-concepts or relating the concept to broader theoretical frameworks or fields of research where it is commonly used. Drawing on good examples and illustrations from the syllabus or elsewhere should be rewarded if these contribute to the explanation.

A good definition and explanation should be clearly and concisely formulated and easy to follow for an informed reader. It is important to remember that English might not be a native language for many, if not most, students and this factor might affect the clarity of writing.

Brief discussions of alternative definitions or criticisms of concepts or definitions should be awarded as long as these are well-founded.

Below, we give a brief presentation of expectations for each concept, including a definition presented in the course (note; some syllabus texts or related reference may provide other definitions, which is perfectly acceptable to rely on).

Specifics on each concept

a) Social mobility

One possible definition presented in class is that “social mobility is the movement of individuals, families, or groups through a system of social hierarchy or stratification”. The central point of a definition is that social mobility refers to movements between hierarchically ordered social positions, resources or rewards.

An explanation should:

- mention that the concept most commonly refers to intergenerational social mobility (comparison of parents and children)
- mention what a ‘social hierarchy’ might be or what social stratification implies; positions (e.g. classes, occupations, etc.), resources (e.g. education, wealth, different types of capital, etc.), or rewards (e.g. income, status etc.).

A good explanation might also:

- differentiate between intergenerational and intragenerational social mobility, vertical and horizontal mobility, and absolute and relative measures of social mobility
- briefly discuss different types of hierarchy, and their theoretical or empirical relevance

- briefly discuss pros and cons of using or relying on different definitions of hierarchies in research. In the course, much emphasis is placed on strengths and weaknesses of different measures (income, class, microclass, education, status etc.).
- reference the O-E-D-triangle.
- differentiate between individuals' mobility experience and aggregate mobility levels.
- provide information which countries are generally considered to be more socially mobile than others.

References to empirical findings on social mobility are not required for a good grade, but may be rewarded if they contribute to the explanation.

b) Gender pay gap

In one of the readings of the syllabus, the gender pay gap was defined as “the average difference between the remuneration for men and women who are working”. Students are expected to state that in most cases of the gender pay gap women are paid less than men and differentiate between non-adjusted and adjusted gender pay gap. The latter explicitly considers differences in the type of education, hours worked, occupations chosen, and job experience of men vs women.

An excellent answer should outline at least some of the following:

- Why the gender pay gap exists and what are its main determining factors;
- The role of human capital in the observed gender pay gap;
- What the role of division of labor in the home is in the existing gender gap;
- What role labor market discrimination plays in the gender pay gap.

Excellent answers might also elaborate on:

- The role of the Mincer function in generating the gender pay gap;
- The methods used to explore the gender gap (e.g. decomposition of gender gap in multivariable statistical analysis).

c) Segregation

One possible definition presented in class is that “segregation refers to the separation of socially defined groups in space”. We have emphasized in lectures that not all segregation is spatial – segregation can also be institutional (e.g. schools, workplaces, fields of study, etc.). The central point of a definition is that segregation is the separation or unequal representation of groups in space or institutions.

An explanation should:

- mention that different types of groups may be segregated (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age etc.);
- mention that segregation can occur in different settings (space or institutions),

A good explanation might also:

- briefly discuss the pros and cons of different measures of segregation, or methodological measurement issues;
- briefly discuss theorized or empirically documented causes of segregation;
- briefly discuss theorized or empirically documented effects of segregation;
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d) Discrimination

One possible definition presented in class is that “discrimination is the differential treatment of persons because of status characteristics that are functionally irrelevant to the outcome in question”. The central point of a definition is that discrimination typically refers to differential treatment based on irrelevant traits.

An explanation should:

- mention that discrimination can be based on individuals’ different characteristics (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, etc.);
- briefly mention different forms of discrimination (taste-based/animus-based/emotion-based discrimination, statistical discrimination, disparate impact/structural discrimination).

A good explanation might also

- briefly discuss what might motivate discrimination (e.g. emotions, rationality, unconscious processes, previous experience);
- briefly refer to empirical findings on discrimination (e.g. how it varies across public and private sectors and in different industries, what groups experience more discrimination etc.);
- briefly refer to methods for assessing the extent of discrimination (correspondence studies/field experiments etc., surveys, decomposition analyses or other approaches).

Part 3 – Essay

Students are presented with three open-ended questions/assignments. They must choose one of them to answer with a long-form essay.

The questions are intentionally very broad, politically contested and not possible to give a definitive answer to, given the state of current knowledge. Students are thus expected not to provide definitive answers, but to discuss different theoretical or empirical contributions and provide a nuanced synthesis and presentation of the topic.

General expectations:

This part is intended to test students' ability to discuss, reason and argue on a topic central to the course. A good essay will be expected to show both a nuanced general understanding of the chosen topic and ability to draw on specific concepts, theories, and empirical findings from the syllabus, other readings or elsewhere. They may relate the topic to other relevant information on current issues where relevant, such as current cases or debates in the news in Norway or other countries, etc. Critical thinking and reasoning is rewarded, including well founded critical views on arguments, theories and findings presented in the course material/syllabus/lectures.

Below, we list what we expect from a good essay in detail. Note that a good grade does not require that all of these criteria are met, but each of these points should factor into the grade, and an essay should meet the majority of these criteria to receive an excellent grade.

Knowledge

- The essay should show sufficient knowledge about and a good understanding of the topic;
- The essay should show an understanding of central concepts, theoretical positions and methods. Concepts, measures and definitions should be used clearly and accurately;
- The essay should show that the student has read and manages to incorporate central arguments from relevant syllabus texts (explicit references are a bonus, not a requirement).

Critical thinking and reflexivity

- The essay should show a high level of critical reflection;
- The essay should present and address counterarguments, possible alternative explanations, and conflicting views/theories, and show openness to alternative interpretations;
- The essay should include critical reflections on the utility, strengths and weaknesses of concepts, definitions and measures;
- Essays that in a good way challenge prevailing views, theories, methods or approaches, particularly those presented in the course or syllabus texts, should be rewarded.

Clarity

- Arguments should be clearly articulated, logically consistent, clearly linked to the question, and progress in an orderly fashion that is easy to follow;
- The essay should be written in a clear, succinct language;
- The essay should be sufficiently grammatically correct and use formally well-formed sentences, but we encourage the examiners to focus on the substantive content of the essay (again, even if essays are written in English, most students are not native-speakers of this language).

Creativity

- Essays that show a high degree of creativity and/or independence in the use of theory, examples, etc., should be rewarded.

Identifying what's important

- The essay should show that the student can differentiate between central and more peripheral aspects of the topic. This is frequently emphasized in the course, where we often discuss questions like 'how much do factors A, B and C matter for outcome Y? Which are more or less important?'. Overemphasizing peripheral points should count negatively.

Empirically informed

- The essay should draw on relevant empirical research from the syllabus or elsewhere and incorporate their implications for the topic. Although we do not expect students to recall specific statistics, years, other facts, etc., we do expect a good essay to incorporate some aspects of empirical findings into the argument;
- When drawing on empirical evidence, the essay should show an understanding of the difference between correlation and causality.

Balance and nuance

- The essay should primarily be an academic text, not a normative or ideological statement;
- A good essay should be balanced and not present only a single side of an argument.

1. What might explain intergenerational persistence in educational attainment?

This is well covered in several lectures and texts focusing on different aspects of educational mobility and persistence. A good essay is expected to discuss different mechanisms (e.g. childrearing and socialization, role models, rational action, genetics, health, neighborhood contexts, etc.), and relate these to different characteristics of parents (e.g. income, education, class, etc.) societal changes (e.g. educational expansion, etc.) and educational outcomes (e.g. years of education, probability of dropping out from a school or an university, etc.). The essays should define intergenerational persistence.

We expect good essays to discuss, in realistic terms, the relative importance of different mechanisms, and to draw on empirical evidence in doing so (for instance, relevant syllabus texts suggest that the impact of neighborhoods is small compared to other family background characteristics).

The question does not specify a national context, so it is up to the students whether to focus on Norway, other contexts or do a comparative discussion.

Central themes on this course related to this topic are:

- The O-E-D-triangle (note that this question is about the O-E-relationship; the O-D-relationship and the E-D-relationship is less relevant for this question);
- Primary and secondary effects (good essays should distinguish between these);
- Trends in educational mobility (showing a slow increase in mobility);
- Theories on intergenerational educational persistence (Industrialism thesis, Maximally maintained inequality);

- Note that rational action theory (Boudon, Breen & Goldthorpe), and cultural capital theory (Bourdieu) are not central in the texts or emphasized in lectures. These may still be relevant to discuss if students are familiar with them;
- Childrearing practices (concerted cultivation vs. accomplishment of natural growth);
- Educational expansion and welfare state institutions;
- Methods (particularly estimates based on parent-child associations, sibling correlations, twin studies and GWAS/PGS scores; observational studies of childrearing may also be relevant).

Other aspects covered on the course that may be relevant here, depending on the students' approach are:

- Gender segregation by field of study and gender differences in educational attainment;
- Assimilation and the educational mobility of children of immigrants;
- The impact of neighborhood contexts and school segregation on educational attainment.

The role of genetics is also emphasized on this course. Students are expected to also refer to and discuss central findings from this literature (a substantial proportion of the variation in educational attainment can be attributed to additive genetics). Not mentioning genetics at all or dismissing this topic without discussion should count negatively.

2. Why do men on average earn higher wages than women?

This essay question deals with one of the most important areas of the course. There was one lecture specifically concerned with explaining why men earn higher wages than women, but some other lectures have also emphasized various aspects of different areas related to the topic. Students do not have to remember the exact statistics on the extent of the problem, but they should be rewarded if they highlight country differences and overtime changes in the gender pay gap.

The following aspects are expected to appear in the written essays:

- The Human capital decision model which outlines the choices which individuals have to make at the end of compulsory schooling, possibly also differentiating direct (e.g. study loans) and indirect (e.g. foregone earnings while studying) costs. In good answers, the role of the Mincer function can be also described,
- Across many countries cultural norms still prescribe that women should take main responsibility for children, which affects women's occupational careers.
- Economic argument: With differences in earnings capacity between a husband (a male partner) and a wife (a female partner), it might seem "rational" to make a traditional division of labor at home;
- Structural inequalities in life-time labor force participation: males more likely to be working fulltime and lifelong, while females are more likely to work part time with career breaks (e.g. maternity leaves). This is a supply side argument (gender differences in labor supply is the reason we have gender pay gaps).
- Demand side - labor market discrimination including taste-based discrimination (what jobs are seen as appropriate for women and men), statistical discrimination and error discrimination (based on correct information or on stereotypes of male and female productivity), and the glass ceiling.
- Feedback effects: if females believe they might be discriminated they might lose motivation to invest in more education and/or for training in male dominated fields.

- Wage structure varies by industry and occupations (e.g. male dominated fields are often well-paid compared to female dominated fields).
- The specialized human capital thesis: female occupations require less specialized human capital than male dominated occupations do, and a specialized skill tends to give higher returns than does a general skill that requires the same amount of training.
- Gendered preferences.

Good/excellent answers would also outline how the decomposition of gender pay gap works in practice and what factors matter more for the gender pay gap:

- Establishing the observed gender gap in pay in one or several countries;
- In statistical models introducing a number of reasons (variables) which should potentially account for the gender pay gap.
- These factors could be the ones describe above such as working hours, fulltime/parttime employment, human capital – type of education, work experience, the type of occupation, industries, private/public sector, access to highly rewarded positions.
- Discussing the relative importance of different factors (articles on the syllabus suggest that gendered sorting by workplace and occupation play an important role, and that the role of employment discrimination is small (reversed), at least in Norway).

3. Suppose you must advise a politician on how to reduce social inequalities in Norway, or in some other country. Please, write down what you would suggest and why.

This is a broader question than the previous two and can be approached from various angles. Students might need to make a choice on which aspect(s) of social inequality (e.g. inequalities in educational attainment, occupational attainment, employment or income gaps, income inequality) and what groups (e.g. gender, ethnic/racial groups, socioeconomic background groups etc.) they want to concentrate on in their answer. The mechanisms they discuss (e.g. discrimination, segregation, skill differences etc.) should be related to these choices.

Both selecting minimalist approach (i.e. specific and narrow areas of inequality) and maximalist approach (i.e. all types of social inequalities) can be equally valid if the writing up of the answer is properly executed. Among many alternatives of answering the question, the following structure can make a good essay:

- It provides relevant and concise background about the chosen aspects of inequality;
- Does not assume that readers (in this case policy makers or their staff members) have detailed knowledge of the topic;
- Concisely and clearly elaborates what is the issue being briefed and what is the significance of it (i.e. scale of the problem). Usually, the more direct the significance, the more effective the memo/report/description;
- Provides evidence to support recommendations or conclusions, but also openly discusses conflicting evidence or alternative conclusions.
- Provide realistic suggestions for implementing recommendations that are as specific as possible.

Some of the aspects which were emphasized in the course as effective ways of reducing social inequalities are as follows:

- Redistribution of income and wealth through welfare state policies;
- The high value of early childhood investment and education;
- The role of institutional structure of educational systems for educational inequalities;
- The social inequality consequences of various family policies (e.g. gender-equal parental leaves);
- The role of minimum income provisions for reducing overall income inequality.

In addition to the issues explicitly referred in the syllabus as effective ways of reducing social inequalities, students can also concentrate on issues mentioned in different parts of the syllabus such as:

- The role of anti-discrimination legislature;
- Quality of teachers and school investments;
- Various policies for immigrant integration and socioeconomic assimilation;
- Measures to reduce horizontal and vertical gender segregation.

A key aspect of the essay is that it should identify what the important causal mechanism(s) producing the chosen form of inequality is, and that the proposed policy should realistically be able to affect it. Proposing policies that will likely be ineffective (e.g. more books in the home to reduce gender differences in education) or unrealistic (e.g. abolishing private property) should count negatively unless these are exceptionally well argued.

This essay question potentially requires more empirical evidence than other two questions, but students are not expected to remember exact levels of poverty or types of family policies existing in Norway or other countries. Nonetheless, a good understanding of the existing situation in the respective fields should be rewarded.