The module examines forms, causes and consequences of social inequality. The module approaches various forms of social inequality (e.g. economic, educational, status and health) and their reproduction from a modern social-science theory position that combines explanatory theory with rigorous empirical research. While sociological theories of social inequality are at the centre of the course, the module also familiarises students with recent contributions from the fields of economics and epidemiology. Empirically, the orientation is cross-national, covering modern post-industrial societies, with a particular focus on Ireland. The lectures are structured so as to examine more than one sociologist at a time and so more than one approach to specific questions such as the relevance of class in the 21st century and so on.

Students successfully completing this module will be able to:

- critically discuss the concepts, and methodological tools useful for, describing social inequalities
- describe and compare social inequalities within and between societies
- critically discuss and evaluate the evidence of theories of causes of social inequality
- critically discuss and evaluate theories of social inequality

Lectures, seminars and assessment

There are lectures every week of term on Tuesday at 12:00 in Room 4047, Arts Block.

The first lecture is on 24th September 2013 and seminars commence week beginning 30th September.

The seminar is on Wednesday 11am in Room 3126, Arts Block.

The purpose and structure of seminars will be outlined in the first session. There are seminars every week of term and a sign-in sheet will be circulated. Students are expected to attend both lectures and seminars and to actively contribute to the seminars. Each student is expected to participate in one team presentation to their seminar group. Your Teaching Assistant for seminars is Kasia Kozien.

Assessment for Part I is by essay, counting for 50% of the total module. The essay length is 2,500 words and students are expected to follow the style guidelines in the student handbook. Assessment for Part II is by examination, counting for the remaining 50% of the available grade.
**Course Outline and Core Readings**

The most important readings are posted on Blackboard.

# indicates that this is not possible for a particular reading in which case students will be directed to the college library or to online journals.

*** indicates importance, the greater the number of stars, the more important the reading.

**Class 1: Thinking about social inequality**

**Topic:** What is meant by ‘social inequality’? Why do we study it?

The lecture will explore both the normative aspects of social inequality (fairness, and domination) and its functional aspects such as does society need some element of social inequality and if so, how much is sufficient and how much leads to dysfunction and social conflict?

**Seminar topic:** Should policies strive for equal opportunities or equal outcomes?

**Reading:**


**Class 2: Social class: The economic source of inequality?**

**Topics:** Marx’s class theory. Sociological approaches to social inequality: Neo-Weberian and Neo-Marxist. Class position as a focal point for analyses of social inequality and ‘life-chances’. How are changes in ‘post-industrial society’ reflected in class structure? What accounts for differences between classes?

**Seminar topic:** How has class structure changed since the 1970s in Ireland?

**Readings:**


Class 3: Social mobility:

Topics: How significant is the class position of one’s parents on an individual’s class position? What is the role of education? How has the ‘upgrading’ of the class structure affected the mobility chances of different classes? Do modern industrial societies differ with respect to ‘open-ness’ or ‘closed-ness’? What makes some societies more open than others?

Seminar topic: How open or closed is Irish society? Feel free to refer to another society if you wish.

Readings:


Class 4: Educational inequality

Topics: Education is an important antecedent of class position and determinant of life chances. Can social inequality (e.g. differential social class position) affect access to, and success in, education? Has that changed over time in conjunction with educational expansion? What factors contribute to educational inequality? Financial resources? Cognitive stimulation in childhood? Middle class cultural capital? Does educational inequality differ between societies? What makes some education systems more equal than others?

Seminar topic: How equal or unequal is Ireland’s education system? Feel free to substitute another contemporary society if you wish.

Readings:


** McCoy, S. and D. Byrne (2011): 'The sooner the better I could get out of here': barriers to higher education access in Ireland, Irish Educational Studies, 30:2, 141-157

Class 5: Health inequality

**Topics:** Is there a social gradient in health? How can we explain health inequality and differences in health behavior? What factors impact health inequalities? How important, if at all are: financial endowment; knowledge and information; stress and absence of control over stressors? Does health inequality differ between contemporary societies?

**Seminar Topic:** Why do members of the professional class live longer?

**Readings:**


* UCL Institute of Health Equity (2010); Fair Society, Healthy Lives. The Marmot Review. UCL


Class 6: Earnings inequality

**Topics:** How have earnings inequality changed? Between the upper and lower end of distribution? Between and within groups (social classes, skill groups)? Across time and between countries? Why have earnings inequality increased? What role has been played by technological change, labour market institutions and ‘globalisation’? Why do some countries have higher earnings inequality? Do countries with higher earnings inequality perform better economically in terms of growth and unemployment?

**Seminar topic:** Should the minimum wage be lowered or raised?
Readings:


Class 7: Income inequality and the welfare state

**Topics:** This lecture looks at earnings inequality, redistribution (taxation/transfer payments) and income inequality as well as types of welfare states. Is the welfare state in a period of retrenchment? How effective are welfare state interventions? Does welfare perpetuate dependence? What is the welfare state paradox?

Seminar topic: Should social welfare payments be universal?


** Iversen, T. and J.D. Stephens (2008) *Partisan politics, the welfare state, and three worlds of human capital formation*. Comparative Political Studies Volume 41 Number 4/5. pp. 600-637


Class 8: Inequality and ‘social dysfunction’

**Topic:** Are less equal societies poorer places to live in terms of health, crime, trust, and happiness?

**Seminar Topic:** Has social inequality broken Irish and/or British society?


Further material is available from: [http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/)

For a critical viewpoint: [http://spiritleveldelusion.blogspot.com/](http://spiritleveldelusion.blogspot.com/)

Class 9: Social status

**Topics:** How does status, prestige and ‘social standing’ differ from social class? Are social status and social class related? Why is social status so important for people? How do status hierarchies come about? How has social change affected status hierarchies?

**Readings:**


Class 10: Discussion of assessment.