Academic and Vocational Pathways to Higher Education: Does the Regional Provision of Education Moderate Social and Gender-specific Inequalities in Switzerland?

Idmorf Christian1, Pfeifer Brändli Andrea2, Leemann Regula Julia2

1Leibniz University Hannover, Germany; 2School of Education FHNW, Basel-Muttenz, Switzerland

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

Data:
We analyse new and unique longitudinal register data for Switzerland which allows for reconstructing detailed educational pathways from upper secondary to higher education. Since 2012, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office has applied a personal identifier in all its surveys in the education sector. This enables nationally harmonised and structured longitudinal data suitable for analysing educational transitions for the cohort which has achieved a first upper secondary degree in 2012 in the entire country (N=74‘867). In addition to detailed information on the educational programmes completed, the region (canton) of educational enrolment, the gender and the migration status of the pupils, information on the highest level of household education as well as respective sampling weights can be matched for a sample of 8’925 pupils from the Swiss Structural Survey. We follow-up this cohort for four consecutive years – which allows to include students who have achieved a vocational baccalaureate as their second upper secondary degree after completing VET – and measure if pupils have enrolled in higher education degrees (HE) after completing secondary education (Gymnasium) to higher studies (Buchholz/Pratter 2018). This makes Switzerland an interesting educational laboratory to study the effect of educational provision on social inequalities in HE access.

In this context we ask how educational offers (general, vocational and specialised baccalaureate schools) and aspirative categories (social origin, gender and the respective intersectionalities) matter for HE access in Switzerland. We are especially interested in how different cantonal educational offers moderate social disparities in HE access. Theoretically, we link policy-driven educational offers with the concepts of institutional and social permeability (Bernhard 2018) and with intersectionalities of social origin and gender (Imdorf et al. 2017). We assume that (1) HE access varies due to educational opportunities at the cantonal upper secondary level, especially for students who access HE via vocational and specialised baccalaureate schools (H1); (2) that the vocational and specialised baccalaureate schools remain important pathways to HE for men and women respectively from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (H2); (3) that the varying cantonal offers of vocational and specialised baccalaureate schools moderate educational inequalities in accessing HE (H3).

Analytical strategy:
In a first step we conduct weighted bivariate analysis to relate educational routes to HE (types of baccalaureate) and aspirative categories (gender*social origin) to higher education enrolment (N=8’925). In a second step we apply weighted multilevel binary logistic modelling to analyse how educational pathways impact differently by canton on HE access (Random Intercept Random Slope Model with students at level 1 and cantons at level 2). We finally add cross-level interactions (Rabe-Hesketh/Skrondal 2008) to analyse how the cantonal educational offers impact on social inequality in higher education access.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings
Preliminary results confirm our first assumption (H1): Estimates for higher education access show that with an increasing share of general
baccalaureate holders in Switzerland (which indicates a rise in cantonal provision of general baccalaureate programmes) transition probabilities especially of special baccalaureate holders and vocational baccalaureate holders to higher education decrease. Hence, institutional permeability varies at the cantonal level in consequence of regional educational policy.

If we turn to social permeability, we first find remarkable educational inequalities regarding the intersectionalities of social origin and gender in HE access: Whereas 63% of female pupils from advantaged social origin transition to HE, the respective share among their male peers amounts to 57%. Pupils from parents without HE degrees enrol much less often in higher studies; 38% of female pupils and only 30% of male pupils do so. Hence, young women from socially advantaged families transition twice as often to HE than young men from disadvantaged families. Remarkably, our multivariate analyses show that these educational inequalities can almost exhaustively be explained with the educational pathways the respective social groups have been allocated to. This is in line with our second assumption, that specialised and vocational baccalaureate schools are important pathways to HE for young women and men respectively from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (H2).

In a last step we will test our third assumption that the varying cantonal offers of specialised and vocational baccalaureate schools moderate social disparities in HE access. All in all, our preliminary findings indicate that social permeability to HE can be steered by implementing appropriate institutional permeability between vocational and higher education and that educational policy at the upper secondary education level matters for inclusion and diversity in HE.

References


Intent of Publication
We intend to submit our paper for a planned special issue of the journal Social Inclusion on the interplay of education, politics, and inequalities.