

Selecting the selected? A sibling-analysis on tertiary education transition in Germany

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9. April, 2014

Past studies found considerable impact of parental background on educational decisions, especially in countries with early educational tracking. Our knowledge is however still limited regarding its impact on educational decisions later on in life, like the transition to tertiary education. Do all pupils who reach the highest secondary school track face the same opportunities to go to the university? And how persistent is the parental background effect which is already decisive for the selection into secondary school? Rational choice models regard probability of success as one of the major components in the explanation of educational transitions. Thus, we address this question decomposing this probability as a function of observable and unobservable characteristics using school grades and subjective estimations about future educational success. Since both of these measures could be shaped by norms, values, parental educational wishes and other traits transmitted mainly within the family, a sibling analysis is performed. The data we use is derived from German Socio-economic Panel (SOEP) and has the great advantage that we can track pupils who participated in the survey at the age of 17 later in life. Our results – which are stable even accounting for unobservables in the selection mechanism – are twofold, showing on the one hand, that only the family's grade average and not the individual deviation from it have a significant effect on the probability to go to university. This points at a strong influence of parental background also on the transition to tertiary education. On the other hand, subjective perceptions show to have an individual effect which holds even if controlling for family effects. This final result gives a hopeful scenario for policy makers and opens interesting opportunities for further research.

JEL Codes: I23, I24, J62.

Keywords: Rational choice theory, Tertiary education transition; Intergenerational Mobility; Sibling correlation; Cognitive and non-cognitive abilities, Subjective estimations

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