

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER, SOCIAL CLASS AND NATIONAL BACKGROUND ON EDUCATION AND WORK CAREER?

Abstract

In this Swedish study, the combined effects of gender, social and national background on transition within the school system and into the labour market are examined. Education has been perceived in some studies as something that neutralises discrimination. However, immigrants, who have studied at the tertiary level in Sweden, are still less likely to obtain jobs matching those of their Swedish counterparts. Students with well-educated parents are favoured in the educational system, whereas Swedish men are favoured in the labour market. This is a large-scale, longitudinal study comprising three entire birth cohorts born in the middle of the 1970s.

Keywords

Gender • social class • national background • education • labour market

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1 Introduction

Sweden has changed from being an ethnically homogenous society to one with a population of approximately 15% first- or second-generation immigrants. After the Second World War, Sweden's industries rapidly developed and many immigrants arrived from the neighbouring Nordic countries and from southern Europe. The influx of foreign labour continued until the early 1970s and was then replaced by a larger share of refugees, who came from Chile, Poland, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon and the former Yugoslavia, among other nations, with their relatives arriving later (SCB & Nilsson 2004). The heterogeneity and the resulting inevitable hierarchisation of the Swedish population are being further enhanced by traditional divisions of gender and social class.

Sweden is an example of how immigration has developed in the Nordic countries. In this region, Sweden has the highest proportion of immigrants, followed by Norway and Denmark. Migration between the Nordic countries is also substantial (~20% of all immigrants) (Norden 2012).

Discrimination against immigrants in the labour market is well known in Sweden (SOU 2005), as it is in many countries. The unemployment rate among immigrants has been comparatively high since the recession in the early 1990s (SCB & Nilsson 2004). Explanations of the high unemployment rates among this group include the idea that their situation is a temporary phenomenon that will disappear when they learn Swedish or that unemployment depends on a lack of skills or education (Hjern 2002; SCB & Nilsson 2004). However, it has also been shown that immigrants who had

been well established in the labour market were more threatened by potential unemployment than comparably qualified Swedes during the times of recession. Moreover, even the highest levels of education did not compensate for non-Swedishness where unemployment was concerned (Hjern 2002). In many countries, professions are also hedged by access being contingent upon credentialisation (Collins 1979), which includes a non-Swedish credential as not being valid.

This leads to the question: Does Swedish higher education have the "power" to level out differences in the labour market, particularly for immigrants, resulting from social structures and discrimination?

2 The rationale for the study

This study describes the transition of three birth cohorts through the educational system and into the labour market. It is a large-scale longitudinal study that provides an overview and an understanding of the relationships between opportunities available to different groups in a society. This study focuses on those who received a Swedish education and are in their early 30s. An intersectional perspective is applied (McCall 2005) taking gender and parents' educational and national backgrounds into consideration when analysing and discussing the educational transition points and labour market position. Previous studies have been criticised for analysing categories that are too broad (SOU 2005) and for their failure to take into account differences within groups of immigrants. This study

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divides people into categories according to different regions of origin, not into greater national or ethnic differentiation, but into sub-groups based on the traditional social structures of gender and social class (here, parents' education).

3 Factors influencing career options for different groups of students

It is anticipated that factors such as gender, social background and immigration will influence education and work career (e.g. Jonsson & Rudolphi 2011; Kilpi-Jakonen 2012). In Sweden, the influence of social class on educational and career options has been debated since the 1940s (Härnqvist 1958), followed by gender (Svensson 1971; Wernersson 1977) and thereafter, immigrant background (Similä 1994). These factors interact and it is difficult to make any division when describing their influence. Therefore, social class and gender have been partly integrated into the description of the educational system and labour market, followed by a separate description of the general theories of social class, gender and immigrant background.

Four influencing factors are highlighted in this study: the organisation of the educational system and the labour market; social class; gender and national background/region of origin.

3.1 Educational system and labour market

From the 1970s, compulsory schooling has required students to attend from the age of 7 until the age of 16, giving limited room for choice, with all pupils studying the same subjects with the possibility of choosing between levels of difficulty in only a few of those subjects (Marklund & Bergendal 1979; Skolöverstyrelsen 1969). Upper secondary school comprised both vocational and theoretical programmes, usually lasting 2 or 3 (and occasionally 4) years. Despite its coherent organisation, upper secondary school has always been divided by gender and social class to a considerable extent. Young men have been much more likely to choose vocational programmes with a technological learning, whereas young women have tended to study education, health care or theoretical programmes such as natural or social sciences. It was possible to enter certain higher education programmes after having completed a vocational programme, but upper secondary theoretical programmes offered more options. Approximately 85–90% completed upper secondary school during the 1970s and through the early 1990s (Svensson 2008). Generally, immigrant youth do not achieve as highly in education as Swedes (Skolverket 2005). These general estimates, of course, differ between gender, social class and national background, among other things (Jonsson & Rudolphi 2011; Lundqvist 2005; Skolverket 2005; SOU 2009). In accordance with the division in upper secondary school, higher education shows similar divisions (Börjesson 2007; Lindberg, Riis & Silander 2011). A larger proportion of women than men (slightly more than 50% of women while less than 40% of men, at the age of 25 years) have enrolled in higher education, which implies that women of both academic and non-academic family backgrounds have been more likely to obtain higher education degrees (HSV 2008). The large proportion of women in higher education can be explained by the gender segregated labour market (SOU 2004).

The extension of the public sector during the 1970s, among others with accessible and affordable pre-school for all children, facilitated

the increase of women in paid labour force. Women's labour force participation is almost as high as men's (~80 %); however, part time work is much more common among women (~50 %; SCB 2008). The public sector is the primary employer within the fields of health care and education professional occupations where a licence is required (preschool teachers and after school care pedagogues are educated through higher education); thereby "forcing" more women than men to complete higher education degrees. It could also be expected that public organisations are more likely to rely on credentials than on networks when appointing new staff, which would facilitate, or at least not disadvantage, women and immigrants who are less likely to have useful networks in this respect (Behtoui & Neergaard 2012; Berggren 2011; OECD 2010).

3.2 Social class and parents education

Parents' level of education is known to influence their children's interest, motivation and choice by being a model and by having access to different kinds of resources (capital), for example, network and private means. There is an association between higher levels of education and "valuable" social network. Parents with ample resources can help their children to manoeuvre successfully within the educational system and access better jobs, even at lower educational achievement levels (Behtoui & Neergaard 2012; Bourdieu 1977; Moi 1991). Nowadays, there are as high expectations for upper middle class women to reproduce their social status as there are for men (Arnot, David & Weiner 1999).

3.3 Gender

As mentioned above, the Swedish educational system from upper secondary school and continuing into the labour market is clearly gender divided. This division can be explained by the gender system being repeated through the logics of difference and hierarchy (e.g. Acker 1990; Hirdman 2003; Ridgeway & Correll 2004). First, the difference means that women and men are seen as two separate categories with different characteristics. In the educational system, women's ascribed characteristics, such as diligence, responsibility and hardworking nature, are more in line with the requirements than men's ascribed characteristics, which among others include self-confidence, dominance and independence. Ever since women and men have been taught and assessed in the same school system (compulsory school from 1842 and high school/upper secondary school from 1927), the evaluation has been to the advantage of women (Arnesen, Lahelma & Öhrn 2008). However, women's higher educational achievements seem not to have improved their situation in the labour market correspondingly (Smetherham 2006), an explanation could be less access to the "right" social capital (Behtoui & Neergaard 2012). It must be observed that the variation in behaviour and traits is larger within than between the group of men and women (Hyde 2005). Second, hierarchy or dichotomy is likely to lead to an inbuilt implication of a difference in value, like "good-bad". The dichotomy "man-woman" offers an interpretation that men are the norm, the reference, giving them an advantage in relation to women in most situations (Hirdman 2003; Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway & Correll 2004). Despite seemingly constant and typical behaviours for men and for women, they differ over time and between cultures (Fuchs Epstein 1999). When there is a change, it occurs particularly during periods of rapid change or crisis (Hirdman 2003). An example

of this could be moving to another country (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Cranford 1999). Different gender order in Sweden, compared with one's country or culture of origin, may lead to disrupted power relations in both work life and private life, influencing educational choices and career aspirations. For example, immigrant men may find themselves placed in subordinate positions in relation to Swedish women.

3.4 Region of origin

Arriving in a new country usually implies a period of adaptation. To be successful in education presupposes an understanding of the expectations and rules within the school system (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). The chance to find employment in line with one's education or previous career depends among other things on trade conditions and network. As mentioned above, education and social class influence the size of the network; in addition, immigrant background is associated with less access to "valuable" social network (Behtoui 2007; Behtoui & Neergaard 2012). Some groups of immigrants accommodate easily and quite rapidly into their new country, whereas others never do. There are two aspects: on the one hand, the acceptance from the majority group; on the other hand, the intensions/frames of reference within the minority group. The most common explanation for immigrants' failure to be accepted is that the majority group judges immigrants as a group rather than individually. Moreover, people belonging to a minority group are perceived as different and as "others", often presumed to be less capable than the majority group (Ahmed 2007; SOU 2005; Stören 2004). However, in Sweden, there are also examples of the opposite, in that English-speaking immigrants from the US or the UK are sometimes perceived as being even more capable than the majority population in certain aspects. The division "we-them" is similar to the gender division and is also recreated at different levels in society, structurally, culturally and individually (SOU 2005). In contrast to the gender division, groups with different national or cultural backgrounds may not meet on an everyday basis (Ridgeway & Correll 2004).

4 Methodological framework and considerations

4.1 Transition points

This study analyses three transition points: groups of students who have 1) completed upper secondary school; 2) completed 2 years of higher education studies (corresponding to the lowest degree level) and 3) obtained an employment requiring at least post-secondary skills (ISCO 3). Finally, there is an analysis of those who obtained employment with post-secondary skill requirements, irrespective of their education.

4.2 National groupings/regions

National background has been defined according to nine large regions. In addition to 1) Sweden, they are; 2) the other Nordic countries; 3) Central Europe including Northern America and Australia; 4) Southern Europe, that is, Spain to Turkey; 5) Eastern Europe, for example, Russia, the Baltic Countries and Albania; 6) South America and the Caribbean; 7) Africa and the Middle East; 8) East Asia, for example, China and Indonesia and 9) West Asia, for

example, the West Bank, Kazakhstan and India. Sweden does not record religion, ethnicity or skin colour in its registers. An aggregation into more or less wealthy countries did not seem to be appropriate, since some groups within a society are more likely to migrate (e.g. well-educated, political activists, poor and ethnic minorities) than others; and an aggregation of countries according to the dominating religion did not seem to be a good alternative either, since there is little evidence of achievement differences based on religion (Stören & Helland 2010).

Immigrants comprise a broad group including both those who were 1) born in Sweden of two immigrant parents or 2) born abroad and had at least one non-Swedish parent. However, time of immigration was also considered and immigrants were divided into 3) having arrived before starting school (at the age of 7) or 4) after already starting school.

4.3 Population

The data for this study come from Swedish registers (Gothenburg Educational Longitudinal Database) and include information on education history, work history and a variety of other individual characteristics, such as, gender, parental education and national origin.

The population analysed is based on those born between 1974 and 1976 (N = 321,613) who were residing in Sweden during the year in which they were 16 years old. These individuals were followed until they were 30–32 years old, that is, until 2006. Since the region of origin is an important characteristic in this study, those for whom there was no information on their own or their parents' national backgrounds (n = 31) were excluded.

In addition to region of origin, the population was also divided into educational background measured as parental education and gender. Parent(s) were divided into 1) having received higher (academic) education equal to 2 years or more or 2) no higher education and education unknown (n = 2874).

4.4 Method

Logistic regression analysis has been applied and the outcome has been presented as "odds". The factors/variables (region of origin, gender and parents' education) were included in all analyses. Moreover, some analyses differentiated between immigrants according to "time of immigration". To study the interaction or intersection between different groups of students, this study adopted a "categorical approach" (McCall 2005).

5 Results

5.1 Upper secondary school

Completion of upper secondary school has become the base level of education for obtaining employment. As can be seen from Table 1, there were large differences between students born in Sweden of Swedish parent(s) and students from other regions of origin. One explanation is that failing to complete compulsory school is more common among immigrant students than Swedish students, meaning that they were ineligible to enter upper secondary school (Skolverket 2005). Swedish students were approximately three (3.21) to five

Table 1. Odds for completing upper secondary school (based on $n = 321,582$)

Regions	Numbers	Men less-schooled home background	Men academic home background	Women less-schooled home background	Women academic home background
Sweden	286,057	4.03*	4.97*	3.53*	3.21*
Northern Europe	10,710	2.04*	2.19*	1.61*	1.47*
Central Europe	1,767	1.48*	1.43	1.45*	1.02
Southern Europe	6,120	1.61*	1.43	1.44*	1.34
Eastern Europe	3,564	2.29*	2.67*	1.80*	1.70*
South America	3,498	1.36*	1.22	1.32*	0.92*
Africa	3,246	1	1	1	1
East Asia	2,992	2.13*	2.23*	2.35*	1.95*
West Asia	3,628	1.86*	2.33*	2.00*	1.75*

Notes : * $p \leq 0.05$.

(4.97) times more likely to complete upper secondary school when compared with students with African backgrounds. Students with backgrounds in the Nordic neighbour countries (Northern Europe) did not stand out as particularly favoured compared with other immigrants. This is an unexpected result considering the similarity of cultures and shared languages with Denmark and Norway (with minor pronunciation and spelling differences), but nevertheless also seen in other studies (Jonsson & Rudolphi 2011). Women's likelihood of completing upper secondary school was less influenced by region of origin than it was for their male counterparts. Women of African or Asian background were more likely (17–22%) to complete upper secondary school than their male counterparts (results not shown). It seems as though there is a general requirement for women to be hard working and conscientious (that is, women need to compensate by hard work, since they are perceived as less competent than men, Hirdman 2003; Ridgeway & Correll 2004) or it becomes general in Swedish society. Perhaps some of the immigrant women perceived that the gender order in Sweden offers other or better options than they would have experienced elsewhere, while some men feel the contrary is true. Possibly, these expectations on women irrespective of their background help them to complete this "lowest" level of education. Focusing on the influence of parental education, having academically educated parents doubled the odds of completing upper secondary school in nearly all regional groups.

Looking at immigrants and considering time of immigration (that is, controlling for the time at which they began school), the results (not displayed) showed that having immigrated before starting school improved the odds of completing upper secondary school more than twofold for students from less schooled home backgrounds, whereas the difference was lower among those with academically educated parents. Parental higher education seemed to buffer some of the difficulties experienced by the recently immigrated.

5.2 Higher education

The next step on the educational "ladder" shows the odds of completing 2 years of higher education studies. Two years was

chosen as a dividing line rather than degrees completed, since there are a considerable proportion of students (26 % of this population) who never complete all of the single courses that make up a degree, or who never collect their final degrees (HSV 2011). The population in these analyses was reduced to include those who had completed upper secondary school. Differences due to region of origin were less in this selected population (Table 2). Again, it can be noted that having shared cultures, and to some extent shared languages, did not improve the odds of students from Sweden's neighbouring countries compared with other immigrants. Since gender and parental education are already considered in the analyses, an explanation might be sought in migration back and forth between the neighbouring countries due to trading conditions and facilitated by the absence of requirements to hold a residence permit (SCB & Nilsson 2004). Inspired by Ogbu's (1998) research in the USA, another tentative explanation could be that Northern Europeans are more likely to hold short-term goals and are therefore less likely to encourage their children to invest in education.

With regard to gender, only a small difference could be seen, particularly small among students from less-schooled backgrounds. An explanation can be found in the structure of the educational system. Education leading to the vocational trades, traditionally occupied by working class men, is offered at upper secondary schools. For example, this includes construction, electricity or vehicle repair and maintenance. However, most of the trades/semi professions usually occupied by women are provided through higher education. This means that women, irrespective of social class, have to undertake higher education in order to get a job with "decent" terms of employment, whereas men can enter the labour market after upper secondary school (Berggren 2008). Thus, Swedish men from less-schooled backgrounds are much less likely to pursue higher education studies, leading to reduced variability within this group. Gender difference was smaller among students with West Asian, Central European (including North American and Australian background) and Eastern European (including Russian) backgrounds (results not shown). On the other hand, the gender difference was largest among students with South American or Caribbean backgrounds; the odds of women from these backgrounds of completing 2 years of tertiary

Table 2. Odds for completing 2 years higher education studies (based on $n = 272,720$)

Regions	Numbers	Men less-schooled home background	Men academic home background	Women less-schooled home background	Women academic home background
Sweden	247,172	1.25*	2.77*	1.69*	1.98*
Northern Europe	7,870	0.81*	1.61*	1.09	1.07
Central Europe	1,241	1.45*	2.49*	1.42*	1.62*
Southern Europe	4,210	1.05	1.58	1.07	0.99
Eastern Europe	2,770	1.49*	2.68*	1.54*	1.64*
South America	2,376	0.73*	0.75	0.99	0.72
Africa	1,952	1	1	1	1
East Asia	2,349	1.53*	1.10	1.67*	0.88
West Asia	2,780	1.95*	1.37	1.83*	0.79

Notes: * $p \leq 0.05$.

studies were 80% higher than for their male counterparts, and this was when controlling for parents' educational backgrounds.

At this level of education, parental education is the most important factor. There was a two to three times higher likelihood that students with an academic family background would complete 2 years of tertiary education compared with those from less schooled backgrounds. This was a general result, except for Asians where the difference was only 20–35% (results not shown). That is, Asian parents, irrespective of educational level, seemed to be pro-education, which corresponds well with the results from studies in other countries (Abada & Tenkorang 2009; Pearce 2006; Yamamoto & Holloway 2010). Moreover, as can be seen from Table 2, students of both genders from academic family backgrounds from Central and Eastern Europe (including Russia, Northern America and Australia) also completed higher education at similar rates to Swedish students, whereas students from African and South American backgrounds were least likely to complete higher education. This study cannot answer "why"; therefore, there is a need to turn to other studies in the search for explanations for the group differences that appear in this study. Studying and being awarded a degree could be perceived as one way of "making it" (Ogbu 1987) or an example of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). However, students with African and South American backgrounds seemed less likely to hold this as true (Ogbu 2004; Suarez-Orozco 1987; Yamamoto & Holloway 2010). One aspect of this could be that in some South American countries, social mobility is highly dependent on family networks and less on meritocracy (Suarez-Orozco 1987), making those such backgrounds less inclined to pursue studies. Perhaps, they are considering moving back home and therefore do not invest in a Swedish education or they may not consider the quality of Swedish education to be as good as elsewhere (Ogbu 1987).

As could be expected, among those who successfully completed Swedish upper secondary school, the negative effect of having immigrated after starting school had almost vanished. It was only among students with less schooled parents that immigration before starting school still had a slight positive influence (~20%, results not shown).

5.3 Labour market

When the tertiary educated entered the labour market, the influence of region of origin was not evident among students with academically educated parents, but it was among the less schooled, among whom Swedishness turned out to be an asset, almost doubling the odds (72–91%, Table 3) to the advantage of Swedes. East Asian women from academic backgrounds were least successful in obtaining matching employment. Unfortunately, this study cannot answer "why" this group is particularly disadvantaged; it is only possible to raise conceivable explanations that have also emerged in other studies, such as the types of education these students have chosen or that they have not been individually judged, especially not women wearing veils (Akhavan et al. 2004). However, these explanations are tentative and the analyses do not reveal why this group stands out as being different.

There were few differences within the immigrant group (results not shown). The time of immigration reappeared as an influencing factor, particularly among men from less-schooled family backgrounds. For them, it was an advantage to have immigrated before starting school; it improved their odds of obtaining employment with post-secondary skill requirements by almost 60%. Having immigrated before starting school may imply that they were second-generation immigrants, and that their parents had had time to become established in the labour market and could be of some help in finding employment through networks (Behtoui 2007; Bourdieu 1977). This is an important asset in the private sector in which a majority of men are employed. The reason for the absence of comparative differences within the group of immigrant women may be that they are more likely to have studied education or health care professions that lead to jobs in the public sector associated with a licence that provides a hedge against competition (Berggren 2011, Collins 1979). Comparing women and men from different regions of origin, West Asian women were more likely to have obtained matching employment (48%) than their male counterparts (results not shown). This study cannot provide any explanations for this gender difference. However, explanations originating from gender theory and earlier research could lead to

Table 3. Odds for obtaining employment with post-secondary skill requirements (based on $n = 94,135$)

Regions	Numbers	Men less-schooled home background	Men academic home background	Women less-schooled home background	Women academic home background
Sweden	87,610	1.91*	1.04	1.72*	1.44
Northern Europe	1,749	1.32	0.77	1.17	0.90
Central Europe	428	1.56	1.07	1.50	1.37
Southern Europe	905	1.63*	0.51	1.46	0.75
Eastern Europe	940	1.16	0.89	0.92	0.87
South America	513	0.97	0.74	0.96	1.27
Africa	424	1	1	1	1
East Asia	700	1.08	0.64	1.27	0.59*
West Asia	866	1.01	0.66	1.40	0.99

Notes: * $p \leq 0.05$.

explanations pointing at gendered educational choices and perhaps also at the comparatively gender-equal Swedish society, where men coming from West Asia may experience a loss of status, particularly relative to women. This is a loss that may lead to an oppositional attitude (Archer & Yamashita 2003; Ogbu 1992), which could prevent some groups of men from doing what is best suited or expected. An example could be difficulties in accepting women in management positions.

Looking at parental education and region of origin, academically educated parents seemed to be of extra value for the tertiary educated with an African or South American background. This group had about a 70–80% higher likelihood of obtaining employment with post-secondary skill requirements for the tertiary educated in relation to their fellow students with less-schooled home backgrounds (results not shown). Inspired by the research of Bourdieu (1984), it is possible that there are similarities among people coming from well-educated family backgrounds. They behave or express themselves in ways that improve the odds of obtaining employment.

This is a very coarse estimation of how well different groups of students become established within the labour market. The study only considers one aspect of skill level and nothing about specialisation. There are also large differences within “skilled employment” that, among other things, includes large income differences, an aspect that has not been considered in this study.

5.4 Final outcome

A summary of the effects of all influencing factors, including those we do not know anything about, is shown. These descriptive statistics show how different groups transferred and manoeuvred through the educational system and into the labour market. What has not been considered in the previous analyses are the “alternative routes” to continue education or to positions in the labour market. There were, for example, several other entrance quotas to higher education other than the direct transition from upper secondary school that was described earlier. Examples of alternative entrance paths include

the possibility of supplementing inadequate or insufficient grades from upper secondary school through mature aged education or to enter via the Swedish Scholastic Assessment Test (Berggren 2007). Alternative entry points to employment also exist, such as for those individuals who have pursued higher education studies abroad, or who have had the possibility to establish a career in the workplace and therefore have been able to occupy positions for which they are formally underqualified (Alpin, Shackleton & Walsh, 1998; Oscarsson & Grannas 2002).

Table 4 shows descriptive statistics. Percentages are calculated in relation to the numbers of individuals in the same category in the total population. Column III shows the differences between the percentages in Columns I and II, while Column V shows the difference between Columns II and IV.

Starting with Column I, students with academically educated parents and Swedes were more likely to complete upper secondary school (both categories were above 85%). Individuals originating from Africa and those who had immigrated after starting school were the least likely, with only approximately 60% of them completed upper secondary school. On the whole, there were no gender differences.

Column II shows that more than 50% of students with academically educated parents completed at least 2 years of tertiary studies. Women, Swedish students and students from Eastern European countries (including Russia) were other categories of individuals quite likely to complete tertiary studies (30–36%). This column includes all students who have completed 2 years of tertiary studies, as well as those who have chosen an “indirect” path to higher education. The differences in percentage units in Column III, can be understood as lack of interest, support or provide confidence to continue studying among those who had completed upper secondary school. (At this time, there were several options for supplementing grades and subjects in order to become eligible and to compete for a higher education study place.) The higher the difference in percentage units, the lower the likelihood of pursuing tertiary studies. Men and students from less-schooled and Northern European backgrounds belonged to the “least likely” group. So far, these results correspond with the previous analyses conducted in this study.

Table 4. Summarised effects, per cent calculated from total population

Categories	Completed upper secondary school	Completed ≥ 2 years of HE		Obtained a job with skill requirements corresponding to ≥ 2 years of post-secondary education	
	%	%	Diff unit %	%	Diff unit %
	I	II	III	IV	V
Women	84.8	36.0	48.8	40.3	4.3
Men	84.9	27.2	57.7	40.1	12.9
Academic parents	90.5	51.5	39.0	56.6	1.1
Non-academic parents	82.3	22.7	59.6	33.0	10.3
Sweden	86.4	32.8	53.6	41.8	9.0
Northern Europe	73.4	18.1	55.3	25.5	7.4
Central Europe	70.2	28.1	42.1	34.0	5.9
Southern Europe	68.8	16.7	52.1	24.6	7.9
Eastern Europe	77.7	30.4	47.3	35.4	5.0
South America	67.9	16.3	51.6	24.1	7.8
Africa	60.1	14.7	45.4	20.6	5.9
East Asia	78.5	25.9	52.6	31.4	5.5
West Asia	76.6	27.7	48.9	31.3	3.6
Immigrated <7 years	76.0	21.9	54.1	29.7	7.8
Immigrated >7 years	60.7	17.8	42.9	20.5	2.7

Column IV shows the labour market position. Overall, it seems as if all groups/categories had been successful in the labour market, with more of them having obtained positions with “skill requirements corresponding to ≥ 2 years of post-sec” than having “completed ≥ 2 years of HE”. An explanation for this positive outcome is probably that this category, developed by Statistics Sweden, includes post-secondary education other than higher education (SCB 1998).

Among students with academically educated parents, almost 60% had obtained jobs with post-secondary school requirements (Column IV). This was an expected result, considering the dependence on formal education that privileged groups in society share in order to reproduce their status (Arnot, David & Weiner 1999; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). What is of greater interest, is the similarity between women and men, who were equally likely to hold positions requiring post-secondary education. These were the labour market outcomes despite men’s lower formal educational qualifications. It is unlikely that such a large percentage of men would have obtained the educational qualifications elsewhere (e.g. other post-secondary school education or tertiary studies abroad) to be able to match such positions. It is more likely that they established their careers in the workplace, or accessed the labour market through networks and have managed to obtain positions for which they are underqualified for, from a strict meritocratic point of view (Alpin, Shackleton & Walsh 1998; Behoui & Neergaard 2012; Oscarsson & Grannas 2002).

Column V shows the differences in percentage units between Columns II and IV. A low percentage unit can be interpreted as a higher dependence on the educational system, and a high percentage unit can be interpreted as a higher dependence on social networks (here measured as parents’ education and Swedishness). However, a low percentage unit (1%) can also be understood as an obvious choice of higher education studies, such as among students coming from an academic background. They are dependent on the educational system to obtain desirable positions in society, but those coming from affluent backgrounds and those with appropriate networks also need a higher education degree to justify their careers (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). Small differences between formal education and position can also be found among women (4%). What did not appear as clearly in the earlier step-by-step analysis was that a majority of men seem not to need higher education in order to obtain positions on the same skill level as a majority of women do. We know from the previous research that men who have completed education at the secondary level sometimes earn more than women who have completed a traditional female semi-professional education at the tertiary level (Ljunglöf & SACO 2011). However, we did not know how such a large proportion of men could make such a “jump”, skipping tertiary education and still ending up in positions at similar skill levels as women with tertiary qualifications.

6 Summary and discussion

In the transition from higher education to the labour market, results demonstrated that social structures continued to play a role, but to a lesser extent. Higher education qualifications do not level out the differences for all groups of students. Immigrant students from less-schooled backgrounds and those who had immigrated after starting school were least likely to obtain positions that required post-secondary education. This can be understood as a remaining disadvantage of having less support from the types of social networks that could be provided by academically educated parents and parents who have been established in Swedish society for a longer time. Support from academically educated parents seemed to be most important for students from South American and African backgrounds when entering the labour market.

With regard to gender, higher education did level out inequalities in the labour market in the sense that it helped women to obtain positions at corresponding skill levels to those obtained by men without higher education. Studying gender and different regions of origin, tertiary educated women from the western parts of Asia (e.g. the West Bank, Iran and Pakistan) were particularly more successful in the labour market compared with their male counterparts. Further studies could ascertain, if the differences can be explained by these women's educational choices and/or by their greater ability or wish to assimilate into Swedish society.

These small remaining differences in the labour market were preceded by a much larger selection process taking place during the years spent in the educational system. Students of African and South American backgrounds did not transfer to a higher level of education, and as expected, those who immigrated after starting

school. The results suggest that compulsory school needs to support these groups of students in ways other than these used today. However, once students from these regions had passed the first obstacle, that is, completing the secondary level, they did not stand out as disadvantaged at the next stage. The likelihood of completing 2 years of tertiary study became more dependent on parental education than on region of origin. Students with a West Asian background followed by students with East European and East Asian backgrounds seemed to be the groups most likely to use the formal educational system, or to be most dependent on it, for obtaining positions in the labour market with post-secondary requirements.

After students have completed secondary education, Swedish higher education not only continues to provide a sorting mechanism for individuals on the basis of parental education but it also levels out gender differences and, to some extent, regional differences. When entering the labour market, the gender equalising educational effect seems to be erased. The Swedish labour market favours Swedish men, foremost. Social class background (measured here by parental education) does play a role, but not as much as it did in education.

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