LIFETRACK POLICY BRIEF

FINLAND

03| July 2021

Laura Heiskala
Jani Erola

dial Dynamics of Inequality
Across the Lifecourse:
structures and process

NORFACE
ERA-NET

Recent policy reforms

This year, Finland renewed its upper secondary education by extending the minimum school leaving age to 18 years, making application to upper secondary education mandatory and studies at upper secondary level free of charge. Also, the Finnish higher education intake process has gone through major changes in recent years: more students are selected based only on the matriculation exams which take place at the end of general upper secondary education – this used to be the case only in a few specific fields of studies. At the same time, less emphasis is put on study programme-specific entrance exams. The set of subjects for matriculation exams can be selected with no major restrictions, and this repertoire becomes highly important in the higher education application process, as the points given for each grade vary between subjects. Even though higher education institutions are formally free to determine the formation of the points, some subjects, such as advanced-level maths, have become a valuable choice in applying to many fields. The public discussion around higher education intake is mainly built around subject choices and particularly around this one specific elective: advanced-level maths.

Tracking, subject choices, and labour market outcomes

In the Finnish educational system, students are sorted into different tracks relatively late. After nine years of comprehensive school with no formal sorting or tracking, allocation to vocational or general upper secondary school becomes proportionately important and has many consequences for later-life educational and occupational trajectories. Those from the vocational track end up with lower socio-economic status than those from the general track, but no differences in later unemployment between the tracks were found (Heiskala, Erola & McMullin 2021). What is more, further degrees after upper secondary education do not provide additional protection against unemployment. This highlights the importance of upper secondary education.

Of the students who choose general upper secondary school, not all end up in the highest positions. We show how choosing advanced-level maths was already playing an important role in differentiating students within general upper schools as early as in the 1990s. Following a full cohort of individuals born in 1976, we show that students with advanced-level maths end up with higher socio-economic status in early adulthood (age 30) and occupational maturity (age 40) compared to those without advanced-level maths in general upper secondary school. This is mostly explained by differences in further educational degrees: those with advanced maths end up studying fields in higher education which lead to higher positions. As we controlled for comprehensive school grade point average, gender, and social origin in our models, we were at least partly able to take into account the biased selection by ability or family background. Thus, subject-level choices and particularly choosing advanced-level maths has been part of within-school tracking for decades in general upper secondary schools – perhaps the recent public discourse and concerns about the role of advanced maths for higher education intake has just made it more visible.

Transition to higher education

Path-dependencies to tertiary degrees originating from subject-level and track choices at the upper secondary level are against the idealistic image of the Finnish educational system, where prior qualifications do not limit further options. Our studies have shown that entrance exams to higher education did not solve the problems arising from upper secondary education – this system has been highly beneficial for children from high social origins (Heiskala, Erola & Kilpi-Jakonen 2021), and the subject-level choices made in general upper secondary school have in many cases determined pupils' further educational degrees (Heiskala, Erola & McMullin 2021). The renewed higher education intake, where more weight is put on matriculation exams than entrance exams, may have made the problems of upper secondary education easier to notice. Thus, to reduce inequalities stemming from tracking at the secondary education, the solution is not to emphasise the role of entrance exams but to solve the selection problems in upper secondary education. Providing upper secondary education with enough resources and getting rid of the hidden forms of tracking would be a good place to start.

→ Any upper secondary qualification protects against unemployment.

→ Subject-level choices, especially advanced-level maths, have long been part of hidden forms of tracking taking place within general upper secondary schools.

→ Inequalities following on from tracking need to be solved in secondary education before the application process to tertiary education.

Publications

Heiskala, L., Erola, J. & McMullin, P. (2021). "Formal differentiation at upper secondary education in Finland: Subject-level choices and stratified pathways to socio-economic status and unemployment", *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, **12**(3), 323–343. https://doi.org/10.1332/175795921X16137561576439

Heiskala, L. Erola, J. & Kilpi-Jakonen, E. (2021). "Compensatory and multiplicative advantages: Social origin, school performance, and stratified higher education enrolment in Finland", *European Sociological Review*, **37**(2), 171–185. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaa046

About the authors

Laura Heiskala (lamhei@utu.fi) is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Turku. In her current doctoral thesis, she is studying application processes and stratification in the Finnish educational system.

Jani Erola (jani.erola@utu.fi) is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Turku and the director of the INVEST Research Flagship Center. His research interests include educational and socio-economic attainment, family dynamics, socio-economic inheritance, and social mobility.

Further information

LIFETRACK project   ⌘ www.lifetrack.eu   🐦 @lifetrack_dial

NORFACE DIAL programme   ⌘ www.dynamicsofinequality.org   🐦 @dial_research