

# Pathways to higher education: the aspirations of first and second generation immigrants and the permeability of educational tracks in France, Switzerland and Canada

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**Abstract.** Over the past decades, educational policy implementations have increased the eligibility of those completing (upper- or post compulsory) secondary education to access higher education, by introducing vocationally orientated programs on the upper secondary level that offer access to tertiary education. Using panel data from France (DEPP), Switzerland (TREE) and Canada (YITS) we analyse the pathways to higher education in the three countries, looking specifically at the accessibility of higher education through different educational tracks while taking into account different characteristics of the students, i.e. gender and different immigrant backgrounds. We therefore, in each country, focus on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation young adults coming from immigrant backgrounds comparing their pathways with the educational trajectories of native students.

**Keywords:** higher education; first and second generation immigrants; tracking; aspirations; inequalities; orientation mechanisms.

The educational systems in France, Switzerland and Canada are very different. France has a more school-based educational system and a greater tradition of prestigious tertiary education institutions. In France, vocational education does not have a very high status and therefore fails to attract a large proportion of well-performing students. The situation in Switzerland is more or less reversed with less people following academic education and over two thirds of students enrolling in a variety of vocational (VET) programs. Finally, in Canada there is a general secondary school system (without formal academic/vocational tracking) followed by postsecondary academic and vocational programs.

Over the past decades, educational policy implementations in France, Switzerland and Canada have increased the eligibility of those completing (upper- or post compulsory) secondary education to

access higher or tertiary education, by introducing vocationally orientated programs on the upper secondary level that offer access to higher education. Such policies should help to elevate some of the well-known inequalities in the educational system by improving the educational achievements of disadvantaged groups such as students with an immigrant background or those coming from socio-economic disadvantaged households. Despite their different histories and policies as countries of immigrations, the three countries have a sizeable immigrant population, some of which do experience obstacles in their educational and professional careers (Boyd, 2002; Fibbi, Lerch & Wanner, 2006; Frickey, Murdoch & Primon, 2006; Thiessen, 2009; Hupka & Stalder, 2011; Brinbaum & Guégnard, 2012).

In France, as far as the gateway to higher education institutions is concerned the *baccalauréat* is the standard final diploma of upper secondary education in France. There are two particularly important decision stages in the secondary system for both families and their children. The first occurs at the age of 15 at the end of lower secondary (*collège*), where the choice is between academic *baccalauréat* (i.e. *baccalauréat général*) and vocational tracks. The second arises when students are 18 years old and concerns access to tertiary education. The latter has expanded considerably as a result of the increasing number of pupils in secondary education, the increasing number of *baccalauréat* holders and the high social demand for training. In the context of the democratization of secondary education and the expansion of higher education, first and second generation immigrants are more numerous to access to higher education in France. Another measure that has increased the access to higher education is the creation of a vocational *baccalauréat*, which offers new opportunities, particularly to children of working-class or immigrant origins. After the end of lower secondary school, youths can first follow a short vocational course for two years (CAP/BEP) and then access *baccalauréat professionnel* for two years. Today, 58% of young people from immigrant families and 69% of French natives obtain a *baccalauréat* (Brinbaum & Kieffer, 2009). Around forty percent of the former access higher education compared to over half for the latter. Immigrants, especially a significant proportion of youths of North African origin, have a preference for selective short vocational tertiary programs but are diverted towards to the non-selective university sector. This in turn leads to higher dropout rates for these youths (particularly for *baccalauréat professionnel* holders). This unequal access to higher education impacts on degree completion and the subsequent entry into the French labour market (Frickey, Murdoch & Primon, 2006; Brinbaum & Guégnard, 2012).

Unlike in France, the majority of students that finish compulsory education in Switzerland at age 15 enrol in some form of vocational training (VET) that typically last between three to four years (Cortesi & Imdorf, 2013). A majority (87% in 2010 according to SERI, 2013) of these VET offers are organised as dual programmes (apprenticeships), meaning that on average students will go to school one or two days per week and work the remaining time at a training company. Each year the availability of apprenticeship places in proportion to the number of school leavers determines the number of places available (there are basically no intermediaries). In case apprenticeship places are in high demand (e.g. in the early 2000s), training companies can be very selective in the allocation of available apprenticeship places. Previous research has indicated that this selection process forms an obstacle for school leavers with an immigrant background (Imdorf, 2010). Only one out of five students enrol in baccalaureate schools to receive an academic baccalaureate (*Matura, maturité*), granting the student access to higher education institutions (to universities in general, or, after an additional year of work experience, to a university of applied science). With a participation rate of 13 percent in baccalaureate schools (SKBF, 2011), foreign nationals are considerably underrepresented in schools granting the traditional higher education entrance qualification. Lastly, a minority will enrol into an upper-secondary specialized school (*École de culture générale, Fachmittelschule*), a kind of hybrid institution offering school-based programmes that lies somewhere between VET programmes and academic baccalaureate schools and are today geared towards Universities of Applied Sciences (Stalder & Nägele, 2011). Schmid and Gonon (2011) did not find any direct effect of immigrant background on access rate to tertiary education of those holding a vocational baccalaureate. Indeed, some second generation immigrants manage to access tertiary education more often than their Swiss peers (Mey, Rorato & Voll, 2005). Still, Swiss-educated foreign nationals remain underrepresented both at conventional universities and at the universities of applied sciences (6% and 6.7% respectively

in 2007 according to SKBF (2011)). Students with a migration background have to overcome major hurdles at various transition points to make it through the Swiss education system, and the proportion of Swiss-educated foreign nationals decreases with each subsequent level of the Swiss education system (SKBF 2011).

In the case of Canada, the majority of students who finish at 16 compulsory secondary school enrol in higher education. Research shows that most of those who go to higher education enrol at university rather than at a college (Finnie & Mueller, 2008). If there is no formal academic/vocational tracking secondary school in Canada, there are two types of preparatory courses that students can take during secondary school: university preparatory courses and college/work preparatory courses. Most of students take university preparatory courses in language, mathematics or sciences in order to maximize their chance of being accepted in desired program. These preparatory courses aim to increase the performance of students who aspire to higher education. These courses are offered private or public schools or both depending on the province. Immigrants are generally overrepresented in higher education. Recent studies conducted by Picot (2012), and Mc Andrew, Ledent and Pinsonneault (2012) show that youths with an immigrant background (first and second generations) are more likely to participate in higher education than those whose parents are of native backgrounds, no matter their academic performance. According to Finnie and Mueller (2008), around 80% of female immigration youth access higher education compared to 68% for female native Canadians. The gap is similar for males, 68% and 55%. However there are inequalities among immigrants depending on their ethnic or cultural origin. The participation rate for access to university is higher for Asians while it is relatively lower for Latin American, Caribbean and Sub-Saharan African youths than the native majority (Abada, Hou & Ram, 2009; Thiessen, 2009; Anisef, Brown & Sweet, 2011).

The possible unequal access of immigrant students to higher education in the three countries raises the question of how the institutional settings in in these countries enable vulnerable groups to have educational and social mobility. Because of the different educational systems it is likely that this will play out differently for different groups of students in each country. We use the concept of educational pathways to analyse educational careers of youths and to draw a comparison between Canada, France and Switzerland. We ask how educational institutions shape pathways from secondary to tertiary education for male and female students of immigrant origins. We are primarily interested in the possible reinforcement or elevation of educational inequalities arising from policies designed to increase the enrolment in tertiary education and programs that increase the flow from upper-secondary vocational educational tracks to higher tertiary ones. Do the immigrant youth have the same pathways to higher education in the three countries as native youths?

Using panel data from France (DEPP), Switzerland (TREE) and Canada (YITS) we analyse the pathways to higher education in the three countries in more detail, looking specifically at the accessibility of higher education through different educational pathways while taking in account different characteristics of the students, i.e. different immigrant backgrounds and gender. We therefore focus on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation young adults coming from Turkey and former Yugoslavia who study in Switzerland, comparing their pathways with the educational trajectories of the Swiss students. In French sample we look 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation youths particularly from North African origin (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) comparing them with French natives. For Canada, the comparison is between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latino and Caribbean youths and Canadian natives. Using statistical analysis (multinomial logistic regressions), we analyse the different stages of the educational pathways towards higher education.

Our analysis shows that as far as vocational routes to higher education are concerned, immigrant students indeed seem to benefit from professional and technical baccalaureate programs to compensate for their underrepresentation among academic baccalaureate holders. This said, the situation is variable among the three countries. In the Swiss case, such a compensation function of the vocational baccalaureate is not apparent from our data. This might be due to the difficulties of the particular immigrant groups we studied to get hired by employers for more demanding apprenticeships, which is a prerequisite to enrol in a vocational baccalaureate program in Switzerland. Their frequent relegation to bridge-year courses, where students often accept to decrease (“cool down”) their occupational

aspirations to a level where a vocational baccalaureate is not anymore an option, may be provoked by employer discrimination.

In the French case, the North African youths are no longer in retreat anymore in accessing tertiary studies via a general *baccalaureat*, once earlier school performance and career variables on lower secondary level are controlled for. The same holds true for Ex-Yugoslav and Turkish students in the Swiss case, once we additionally control for their socio-economic background, the cultural capital of their parents, as well as for their aspirations. Our results confirm recent findings for both France and Switzerland. In France, immigrant children are more likely to obtain the *baccalauréat* than the native French (Vanholfelen, 2013), when educational characteristics are taken into account. The higher probability of obtaining a *baccalauréat* for immigrant youths illustrates a higher level of ambition and a strong desire for social mobility (Brinbaum & Kieffer, 2009; Caille & Lemaire, 2009; Griga, Hadjar & Becker, 2013). Picot (2012) in turn concludes for Switzerland, that the post-secondary attendance gap in favour of non-immigrant students is due almost entirely to poorer secondary school performance among immigrant students (as measured by the PISA reading scores). Once secondary school tracking is considered, it is strongly associated with a significant part of the gap as well.

For Canada, students from Latino and Caribbean backgrounds are less likely than the majority native Canadians to enrol in higher education. They are more likely to take up college/work preparatory courses and not enrol in higher education. This is not simply due parental socioeconomic status and secondary school background variables because the difference remains significant when social background and education and variables relative to school performance are controlled for. Our results corroborate prior research conclusions (Finnie & Mueller, 2008; Thiessen, 2009). Indeed, even if the majority of Latino and Caribbean youths access higher education, over a third of these youths appear to have their aspirations cooled down, as in Switzerland, towards the more labour market oriented pathways.

This down-streaming of educational aspirations towards second-tier educational pathways (Arum, Gamoran & Shavit, 2007; Crul, Schnell, Herzog-Punzenberger, Aparicio Gómez, Wilmes & Slotman, 2012) seems more the case in Switzerland and Canada compared to France, when the socioeconomic background and educational performance in secondary school is controlled for. In terms of social mobility, the democratisation of the French educational system, including the development of the vocational *baccalauréat*, has enabled more youths of immigrant background to access higher education, albeit unwillingly for them, via the non-selective university sector. Future comparative research should look in turn at the inequalities that first and second immigrant youths face within higher education, with a shift from quantitative to qualitative inequalities (Arum, Gamoran & Shavit, 2007; Duru-Bellat, Kieffer & Reimer, 2008; Kamanzi & Murdoch, 2011).

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