

Young people choose education based on parents' background

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Even though Danish students have equal access to education, their choice of studies is still influenced by social class. Young people from working class backgrounds are motivated by studies with a clear job profile and high income, while prestige and studies with a strong identity appeal to young people of parents with university degrees when choosing which studies to pursue. This is what researchers from the University of Copenhagen conclude in a new study.

Students who have chosen to study medicine, architecture, economy and sociology often come from homes where the parents have completed higher education, whereas business studies and pharmacy often appeals to young people with a working class background. This is documented by a research team from the University of Copenhagen and Aalborg University in a new study.

"There is a connection between the studies chosen by young Danes and their social background. Even for the young people who have very good grades in their A-level exams, and who could successfully seek admission to a large variety of studies, the parents' level of education and social class play an important role in their choice," says Education Sociologist Jens Peter Thomsen, who is one of the researchers behind the study.

The study "The Educational Strategies of Danish University Students from Professional and Working-Class Backgrounds" is based on 60 interviews with Danish students from six different university level study

programmes: Medicine, architecture, sociology, economy, pharmacy and business studies.

Young people of parents with university degrees choose a 24-hour culture

The young people bring with them the resources they get from their families. If you grow up in a home with parents who are doctors or [architects](#) with a strong professional identity, it is an obvious choice to follow the same path as your parents when you grow up.

"For young people whose parents are university educated, factors such as prestige and a strong sense of professional identity are important. They are attracted by an educational culture in which you are a student 24/7, and where leisure activities are tied to the identity that lies within your studies. These young people have also grown up with topical discussions around the dinner table which also prepares them for their lives as students," says Jens Peter Thomsen.

Young people from working class backgrounds choose '9 to 5' studies

When young people from working class homes with good grades in their A-level exams choose other paths than the prestigious studies, it is, among other things, due to the fact that they want a clearly defined aim of their studies.

"The young people who are first-generation university students often choose studies that are more '9 to 5' and less tied up to a sense of identity. They have lower academic expectations of themselves, and they choose studies with a clearly defined goal for their professional lives," in sectors where jobs are easily found.

They do not choose to study, e.g. sociology because it can be difficult to know what it might lead to jobwise, says the education [sociologist](#).

Financial freedom does not erase the influence of the social background

The study shows that young people with a working class background do not experience their financial situation as an obstacle when choosing to pursue higher education. Welfare benefits in Denmark mean you do not have to pay tuition, and you also have the system with the Danish state educational grant (SU). This helps erase the class differences, but they still exist, emphasised Jens Peter Thomsen.

"In the US and in many other European countries you will find the same patterns in young people's choice of studies as in Denmark. Although the Danish welfare system creates more equality," the inequality still exists, he states, and he adds:

"The fact that [social background](#) plays such an important role, challenges our view that everyone has equal opportunities. We will end up with a very narrow view of society if positions of power and prestige are solely reserved for children of parents with a university degree," says Jens Peter Thomsen.

As an example he mentions that medical students from families of doctors may have a different view of the patient than a young person with a working class background, who also chooses to study medicine. If you are to change the pattern in young people's choice of studies, the institutions offering the study programmes will have to make an effort to recruit their students more broadly, says the researcher.

"Young people who come from a working class background, and have

good grades, should be encouraged to take advantage of the full range of opportunities they have. But the effort to reach this goal must start early," says Jens Peter Thomsen.

The study "The Educational Strategies of Danish University Students from Professional and Working-Class Backgrounds" is newly published in the high ranking scientific journal, *Comparative Education Review*.

More information: vbn.aau.dk/files/80605209/Strategic_Educational_Strategies_of_Danish_University_Students_from_Professional_and_Working-Class_Backgrounds.pdf

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