

'More girls than boys think it is important to go to university'

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Credit: University of Oxford

Research by the University of Oxford's Education Department finds that more girls than boys think it is important to go to university by the age of 13, and this aspiration gap persists when the pupils reach 15 or 16.

Higher aspirations and self-belief both influence A-level entry as [disadvantaged students](#) with higher aspirations are more likely to go on and take A-levels, even after taking into account their GCSE performance, says the report.

Drawing on data from more than 3,000 [young people](#) who have been tracked through school since the age of three, the researchers studied how a [young person's](#) aspirations and [attitudes](#) towards university affected their [academic outcomes](#) after GCSE.

Just over half of disadvantaged students though it was very important to get a [university degree](#) at age 15-16, compared with around 60% of those from more advantaged backgrounds. However, the research shows that these students were not as likely to anticipate they would go on to university themselves, with just over one-quarter of them (27%) believing this, compared with 39% of their peers from more advantaged backgrounds.

The researchers found that in Year 9, when the children were aged 13 and 14 years old, girls were likely to have higher aspirations than the boys, with almost 65% saying they thought it very important to go to university compared with 58% of boys. Among girls, around 11% thought getting a degree unimportant but for boys the proportion was higher at 15%.

Over 60% of students who believed (at age 15-16) it was very likely that they would go to university then went on to study three or more A-levels, whereas three-quarters of those who felt they were not at all likely to go to university did not continue on this academic route.

Lead author Professor Pam Sammons commented: 'Our research shows that the students' belief in themselves and their aspirations are shaped by their background. However, positive beliefs and high aspirations play an additional and significant role in predicting better A-level outcomes. These findings point to the practical importance for schools and teachers of promoting both self-belief and attainment as mutually reinforcing outcomes, especially for disadvantaged students.'

Professor Kathy Sylva, the report's co-author, added: 'The higher aspirations of girls in comparison to boys may be linked to their greater A-level success and gaining admission to university.'

The research identifies a number of factors that are important in shaping [pupils'](#) aspirations and their own belief in their abilities. These include attending a more academically effective primary school, a well-resourced secondary school and spending time on homework.

The research was funded by the Sutton Trust, a foundation that aims to improve social mobility through education. It was conducted as part of the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project, 'Believing in Better', by Professor Pam Sammons, Dr Katalin Toth and Professor Kathy Sylva at the University of Oxford. EPPSE is large-scale, longitudinal study that tracks the progress and development of children from pre-school through to post-compulsory education in England. It has investigated various aspects of pre-school, primary and secondary school provision that shape children's attainment, progress and development over successive phases of education since the age of three.

Provided by University of Oxford

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