

Gender and social background influence the choice of upper secondary school

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Young people's choice of upper secondary school is strongly affected by their gender and their parents' educational background. Instead of reducing this division, the reforms that have been implemented in recent

decades have actually resulted in an increase. This is shown in a new dissertation from the University of Gothenburg.

"In the shadow of the social debate concerning the free choice of schools, the choice of programs and subjects at upper secondary [school](#) continues to contribute to the segregation and division of students. Upper secondary schools are extremely gender-segregated, and there is a lot of division on the basis of parents' educational background," says Johanna Mellén.

By and large, young adults' upper secondary school choices remain just as dependent on gender and social background as they were in the 1970s. Those who come from homes accustomed to academic study tend to choose educational programs that prepare them for studies at university, whilst those with less-educated parents tend to choose vocational programs. Boys tend to choose technology-oriented courses, and girls tend to choose broader, university-preparatory programs or health care-related vocational programs.

Johanna Mellén has studied statistical databases and policy documents to see how reforms of the organization of upper secondary school programs have affected the choices made by [young students](#) in an increasingly market-adapted school system. Even though the overall trends have remained unchanged, the changes that have been implemented do have consequences for the way young people make their choices. When all national programs were reorganized in 1994 in order to provide eligibility for higher education, one effect was that more students with academic parents applied for vocational programs.

"One reason for this could be that some of the vocational programs were regarded as providing double opportunities—giving students both the option of quickly entering the labour market and of studying at university at a later date," explains Johanna Mellén.

One consequence of the increased popularity of vocational programs during the 2000s was that it became harder for potential students to be admitted. One example of this was the Construction programme, which had relatively high entry requirements in the mid2000s.

"There was a certain degree of evening out of the significance of students' home environment to their choice of academic or vocational programs. At the same time, however, the data indicates that, to a certain extent, students from study-accustomed homes outcompeted students from less-educated families when applying for traditional vocational programs.

When eligibility for [higher education](#) upon completion of vocational programs was discontinued in 2011, however, the status of vocational education seemed to fall, with lower entry requirements and fewer students from study-accustomed homes.

Another reform that has been of significance to the composition of students is the increased opportunity for specialisation within programs. The gender distribution within the programs for Economics and Natural studies, for example, initially seems to be quite even. For the Economics programme, however, boys usually choose the 'economics' specialisation whilst girls choose 'law,' and it is primarily boys who choose to specialise in mathematics and physics as part of the Natural science programme.

"This is consistent with earlier research that indicates that girls choose paths that they perceive as being broader and more secure, whilst boys are more inclined to think in terms of specialisation, usefulness and the needs of the labour market."

The results of the thesis show the importance of a detailed social discussion about which programs are offered at upper secondary schools,

the way in which subjects can be delineated from each other, and how the choices are made.

"We need to discuss what kind of upper secondary school system we want to have. Do we want upper secondary schools that can both create a better foundation for all citizens and have a sorting function for the labour market? Or do we want our schools to only sort students for the labour market?"

More information: Stability and Change: Exploring policy formations, options and choice in Swedish upper secondary education.

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