

Labour Market Matters



Special points of interest:

- Differences in immigrant selection, and educational systems explain large gap in post-secondary attendance among students with immigrant backgrounds in Canada and Switzerland
- Study finds clear evidence that open-enrolment policies intensify competition between schools, and improve student achievement.

“Only 8% of students with poor secondary performance and Canadian born parents attended university by age 23, compared to over one-half of Chinese-background students, and one-third of those with other Asian backgrounds.”



In Canada, higher expectations in immigrant families played a significant role in explaining higher rates of university attendance among immigrant-background students.
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Differences in immigrant selection explain, in part, the large gap in immigrant university participation between Canada and Switzerland

In North America, students with immigrant parents typically achieve higher levels of education than their counterparts with domestic-born parents. In Europe however, the opposite is typically true. In Canada, immigrants students (1st or 2nd generation) are 1.6 times as likely to attend university by age 23 as students with Canadian born parents. In Switzerland, 1st generation students are only 0.45 times as likely to attend as students with Swiss born parents, and 2nd generation students 0.8 times as likely. A paper by CLSRN affiliates Garnett Picot (Queen's University and Statistics Canada) and Feng Hou (Statistics Canada) entitled **“Why Immigrant Background Matters for University Participation: A Comparison of Switzerland and Canada”** ([CLSRN Working Paper no. 128](#)) finds that differences in immigration systems as well as educational structures may be the reasons for these differences between Switzerland and Canada.

The Canadian immigration system emphasizes the selection of immigrants with high levels of education, higher than that of the Canadian population. This is one reason why their children are more likely to attend university. Immigrants to Canada also have tended to come from source regions, such as Asia, that place a high value on educational attainment and working in professional occupations. In comparison, until the 1990s the Swiss immigration system placed less emphasis on education and brought in immigrants with lower education from source countries

that differed from that seen in Canada.

Differences in the education systems also play a role. The Canadian and Swiss education systems are structurally very different. In the Swiss system, in the 7th or 8th grade students are streamed into either an upper school track with more intellectually demanding courses aimed at university, an intermediate track, or a basic track. Students with immigrant backgrounds are over-represented in the lower-level tracks, which tends to limit further educational opportunities. There is little or no streaming in the Canadian system during elementary and secondary schooling in most provinces. As a result, comparatively more immigrant-background students are eligible to apply for post-secondary options. In addition, unlike Canada, Swiss students have access to strong vocational training at the secondary level which negates the necessity to continue to the postsecondary level for many.

Using novel longitudinal surveys, the research finds that in Switzerland, the lower university participation rate among immigrant-background students is entirely attributed to poorer secondary-school performance among immigrant-background students, as compared to students with Swiss-born parents. Secondary school performance was measured by Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores – an OECD assessment administered to 15-year-old students internationally. The lower secondary school performance of immigrant-

background students could itself be explained in part by their background characteristics.

In Canada, higher expectations in immigrant families (as compared with domestic families) regarding the students' university attendance played a significant role in explaining the superior university attendance among immigrant-background students. Differences in PISA scores were not important, since both groups performed about the same in PISA tests. Indeed a very high share of students with Asian backgrounds found ways to attend university, even if they performed poorly on the PISA tests. Only 8% of students with poor secondary performance and Canadian born parents attended university by age 23, compared to over one-half of Chinese-background students, and one-third of those with other Asian backgrounds. There could be a number of reasons for these differences, as discussed in the paper.

Source country also matters. In Switzerland, immigrant-background students of Western European origins (German/Austrian/French/Belgium) were more likely than 3rd- and higher generation students to attend university, while immigrants of all other origins were less likely to attend. In *Canada*, almost three quarters of students of Chinese origin attend university, more than twice the rate among students with Canadian-born parents. However, this advantage is not restricted to Asian families; students in immigrant families from almost all source countries are more likely to attend university in Canada than students with Canadian born parents.

Open enrolment policies found to increase competitiveness among schools – leading to improved educational outcomes

“Open enrolment” – a policy which allows students to attend public schools outside their neighborhood catchment area – is intended to improve student outcomes through two primary channels: by allowing families to enroll their children in schools that are higher quality or better matches; and by creating incentives for school managers to increase effort in order to attract or retain students when faced with increasing competition. A paper entitled **“Open Enrolment and Student Achievement”** ([CLSRN Working Paper no. 126](#)) by CLSRN affiliates Jane Friesen (Simon Fraser University), Benjamin Cerf Harris (U.S. Census Bureau) and Simon Woodcock (Simon Fraser University) finds clear evidence that open enrolment improves student achievement.



Jane Friesen
(Simon Fraser University)

In 2002, British Columbia adopted province-wide open-enrolment. Using administrative and test score data provided by

the B.C. Ministry of Education, the researchers study the effect of this policy change on students’ grade four reading and numeracy standardized test scores. For students who live in areas where public schools are very distant from one another, the substantial travel costs associated with opting out of their catchment school make it unlikely that the new policy would have meaningful effects. However, for students who live in densely populated urban areas that are served by large numbers of proximate public schools, full open enrolment may substantially increase local opportunities to opt in to public school alternatives, and intensify competition among schools.

“Open enrolment can provide students the opportunity to enroll in their preferred institutions – regardless of their home catchment area, as well as increase incentives for schools to innovate and improve in order to attract and retain the best students in an open education market.”

The researchers find that both the reading and numeracy test scores of the average student improved as a result of open

enrolment. The effect size for the average student is very small (0.04 standard deviations in reading and 0.03 standard deviations in numeracy). However, for students who reside in densely populated areas, the effect size is considerable; among those at the 90th percentile of the distribution of public school density (i.e. who live within a reasonable commuting distance to 8.5 public schools), the estimated reading and numeracy effects are 0.09 and 0.07 standard deviations respectively.



Benjamin Cerf Harris
(U.S. Census Bureau)

The study finds that the benefits of open enrolment also depend on the quality of local public school alternatives. The estimated effect sizes are greatest for students whose catchment school ranked lowest in terms of average test scores, compared to nearby public schools. These students benefit because of increased competition between schools, and experience no effect of gaining greater access to nearby

public schools where test scores are higher on average. For students whose catchment school ranked highest compared to local alternatives, the benefits of increased competition between schools is offset by the negative effect of gaining greater access to nearby public schools where test scores are lower on average.



Simon Woodcock
(Simon Fraser University)

The finding that increase scope for choice among public schools under B.C.’s open enrolment policy was beneficial – particularly in densely populated urban areas – in improving educational outcomes, has important implications for the debate on public school choice policies. Open enrolment can provide students the opportunity to enroll in their preferred institutions – regardless of their home catchment area, as well as increase incentives for schools to innovate and improve in order to attract and retain the best students in an open education market.

Endnotes

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Articles in *Labour Market Matters* are written by Vivian Tran - Knowledge Transfer Officer, CLSRN, in collaboration with the researchers whose works are represented. For further inquiries about *Labour Market Matters* or the CLSRN, please visit the CLSRN Website at:

<http://www.clsrn.econ.ubc.ca> or contact Vivian Tran at: Vivian.Tran@ubc.ca