

Why Immigrant Background Matters for University Participation: A Comparison of Switzerland and Canada

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Abstract

This paper extends our understanding of the difference in university participation between students with and without immigrant backgrounds by contrasting outcomes in Switzerland and Canada, and by the use of new longitudinal data that are comparable between the countries. The research includes family socio-demographic characteristics, family aspirations regarding university education, and the student's secondary school performance as explanatory variables of university attendance patterns. In Switzerland, compared to students with Swiss-born parents, those with immigrant backgrounds are disadvantaged regarding university participation, primarily due to poor academic performance in secondary school. In comparison, students with immigrant backgrounds in Canada display a significant advantage regarding university attendance, even among some who performed poorly in secondary school. The included explanatory variables can only partly account for this advantage, but family aspirations regarding university attendance play a significant role, while traditional variables such as parental educational attainment are less important. In both countries source region background is important. Possible reasons for the cross-country differences are discussed.

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