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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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Keywords: immigration, second generation, higher education, university participation

Executive summary

This paper focuses on the participation in university by three groups defined by their immigrant background, (1) young immigrants, (2) the children of immigrants and (3) the children of domestically born parents. These groups represent the 1st generation, 2nd generation and 3rd plus generations respectively. The paper attempts to determine what accounts for the differences in university participation among these groups. There have been a number of papers on this topic, but this paper has a couple of unique features. First, secondary-school performance as well as other well-established variables are used to explain differences in rates of university participation. Only recently have such data become available. Second, using newly developed, and most importantly, comparable longitudinal data, the paper contrasts the findings for Canada and Switzerland, two countries with very different outcomes. In Canada, university participation rates are *higher* among students with immigrant backgrounds than among their counterparts with domestically born parents, but in Switzerland they are *lower*. Possible reasons for the different outcomes are discussed. These two countries in many ways reflect the differences between North America and Europe regarding immigrant educational outcomes.

In Switzerland, the lower levels of university participation among 1st and 2nd generation students can be accounted for almost entirely by poorer secondary-school performance¹ among students with immigrant backgrounds. This poorer secondary-school performance is explained in part by differences in family and socio-economic backgrounds of immigrant students compared with students with Swiss-born parents. In addition, there is significant variation in university participation across immigrant source regions. Students with immigrant backgrounds from European Union countries such as Germany, France, Belgium, and Austria tend to have higher levels of university participation than students with Swiss parents. Little of this positive gap is explained by the variables in the analysis, including secondary-school performance. Students with immigrant backgrounds from countries other than Germany, France, Belgium, and Austria have lower levels of university participation, with poorer secondary-school performance accounting for much of this.

Canadian outcomes are very different. As noted, students with immigrant backgrounds, including both the first and second generations, have a much *higher* rate of university participation than their counterparts with Canadian-born parents. The explanatory variables in the analysis account for about 60% of the difference, with university aspirations among students and their parents accounting for the largest portion. Unlike in Switzerland, however, differences in secondary-school performance in Canada account for little of the difference in university participation rates among students with and without immigrant backgrounds. As in Switzerland, there is significant variation by immigrant source

¹ As measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) literacy reading score at age 15.

region. In particular, students with Asian immigrant backgrounds are much more likely to pursue university education than students with other immigrant backgrounds and students with Canadian-born parents. In Canada, this high level of university participation by Asian students is observed even if they perform poorly in secondary school. However, the high university participation rates are not restricted to Asian students. Students with immigrant backgrounds from all source regions have university participation rates equal to or above those of students with Canadian-born parents.

Differences in parents' education play a relatively small direct role in explaining differences in the postsecondary-participation rate between the three generational groups. However, this variable may act indirectly through secondary-school performance or parents' aspirations regarding the educational attainment of their children.

What explains the differences in outcomes between Canada and Switzerland? Differences in the immigration systems likely matter. The Canadian system emphasizes the selection of immigrants with high levels of education. Canadian immigrants have also tended to come from source regions, such as Asia, that place a high value on educational attainment and working in professional occupations. The Swiss immigration system has traditionally brought in lower-skilled immigrants—although this has been changing in recent years. These inter-country differences in immigrant characteristics will affect first- and second-generation educational outcomes in the two countries.

Differences in the education systems also play a role. The more structured Swiss system allows students less flexibility in their academic program as they advance through secondary school. Immigrant students are overrepresented in the lower academic streams, and this affects their likelihood of attending the postsecondary level. The Canadian school system does not have such a streaming process. However, Swiss students have access to strong vocational training at the secondary level; this negates the necessity to continue to the postsecondary level for many.

Speculation regarding other potential explanations of the difference in outcomes between the two countries is presented in the conclusion, focusing on why students with immigrant backgrounds in Switzerland have lower PISA scores and whether differences in meritocratic practices contribute to the differences between countries.