International Journal of Educational Research 77 (2016) 62–73

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

If grades are not good enough—The role of self-assessment in the transition to tertiary education

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 November 2015
Received in revised form 1 March 2016
Accepted 7 March 2016
Available online 19 March 2016

Keywords:
Self-assessment
Transition to tertiary education
Educational panel data
Hungarian life course survey

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the transition to tertiary education, using data from a Hungarian panel dataset called Life Course Survey. A sample of 4500 students is analysed from a single school cohort which began secondary school in the academic year of 2006/07 and finished it between June 2010 and 2012. The question to be analysed is whether the students' self-assessment could modify the impact of their grades on the application to tertiary education. The results show that a more optimistic interpretation of the students' own ability increase the probability to submit application to tertiary education among students with lower than average grades. The students with good grades are likely to be influenced by their grades rather than by their self-assessment in the transition. Among those, however, whose transition to tertiary education is ambiguous because of low grades, self-assessment does play a role.

1. Introduction

A naïve first guess of a layman who would like to rate factors contributing to the choice of further education would probably be that grades play an instrumental role in this process. However, there is a fairly broad consensus in prior research that track choice is clearly determined by social status (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Jackson, 2013; Van De Werfhorst, Sullivan, & Cheung, 2003). In addition, individual ability is usually understood as a mediator through which the indirect effect of parental background manifests. Focusing on grades, however, is not necessarily futile, since good grades also serve as admission tickets to higher order tracks in many of the school systems. Nonetheless, there is an already established relationship between students' school achievement and their academic self-concept (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000); and academic self-concept is also known as a predictor of track choice (Guo, Parker, Marsh, & Morin, 2015; Jackson, 2003; Musu-Gillette, Wigfield, Harring, & Eccles, 2015; Nagy, Trautwein, Baumert, Köller, & Garrett, 2006). Hence, the aim of this paper is to shed more light on how students' self-assessment moderates the impact of grades on transition to tertiary education.

More self-assessment, or in other words, higher perception of one's own ability might contribute to the choice of the optimal level of effort. Admission to further education is a combination of ability and effort. Effort is costly because it means an instant investment with a delayed and uncertain future payoff. If students perceive themselves more able than others, this self-perception might lead them to invest more effort, because they are certain that effort will be not fruitless (Azmat & Iriberri, 2010). In other words, those with higher self-assessment might invest more effort (e.g. preparing for the lessons,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.03.004
0883-0355/

doing homework) than those who think that such investment is meaningless, since it is ineffective no matter what happens. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that at times only symbolic barriers prevent students from choosing knowledge intensive educational routes, simply because they do not dare (Sjögren & Sällström, 2004). Higher self-assessment could also be translated into opting for challenging goals, simply because of larger confidence in one's ability.

Human capital theory suggests that people's decisions on educational pathways are influenced by the expected labour market returns of education. This argument implies that individuals do have accurate information about the future payoffs of education. As research showed, adolescents are relatively well-informed about the returns of education in economically developed countries (Avery & Kane, 2004; Varga, 2001); however, this seems not to be the case in low-income countries (Jensen, 2010). Furthermore, prior research also revealed a certain self-enhancement mechanism to be operating if the individual rated the return of education in comparison to others (Botelho & Pinto, 2004). Nonetheless, perceived information about the return of education is known to be decisive when opting for further education in many countries (Betts, 1996; Varga, 2001; Wolter, 2000). Moreover, experimental interventions with the focus on providing information about the return of education showed increasing educational attainment (Jensen, 2010; Nguyen, 2008).

Prior sociological research on this issue was mainly influenced by the seminal paper by Breen and Goldthorpe (1997), who proposed three mechanisms which might explain why students belonging to different social classes make various educational decisions. Students in higher status families have stronger preferences to remain in education, since parents in general would like to assure that their offspring obtain at least as advantageous a class position as their own, and higher class position requires, on average, more education. Furthermore, students in various class positions interpret the probability of possible future educational success differently. According to the authors, since students might continue education if their ability (which incorporates expectations about future educational success) exceeds a certain level, and students in more advantageous social classes are assumed to have a higher level of ability, they are more likely to opt for further education. Finally, students in different social classes also have different levels of resources available, which might also explain different educational decisions. Later Breen (1999) also specifies that students in different class positions have different beliefs about the role of ability and effort in education. Lower status students are more likely to believe that effort is not valuable; and even in case no ability differences are present between students, downgrading the role of effort leads to a more pessimistic interpretation of educational success, which might explain less ambitious educational decisions.

Even though disadvantages of origin could be mitigated with educational policy interventions, status-related educational differences were stable in the last decades (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993), and are assumed to remain stable in the future (Gamoran, 2001). However, another analysis found evidence about declining class inequalities in educational attainment (Breen, Luijkx, Müller, & Pollak, 2009). In that sense it might be crucial to concentrate more intently on individual characteristics which are able to overwrite or at least modify the impact of social constraints. Expectancy-value theory applied in the field of education (Eccles, 1983) predicts that academic outcomes and choices are mainly determined by skill-related and goal-related expectancies or perceptions (Eccles, 2009). More specifically, students will opt for further education if they have confidence in their abilities to succeed, and if they attach high value to further education. Empirical research has shown that personal ratings about efficacy influences academic and career choices (Betz & Hackett, 1986; Musu-Gillette et al., 2015; Nagy et al., 2006). It was also shown that students select those activities in which they feel most efficacious

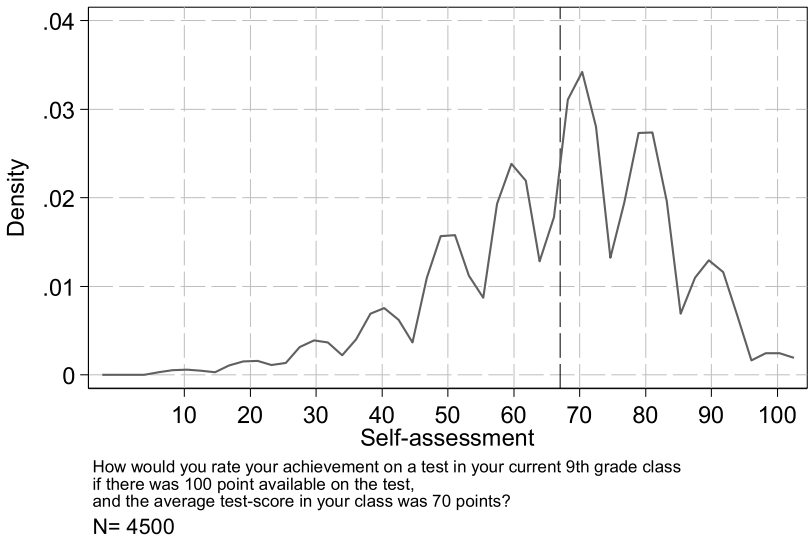

Fig. 1. The distribution of self-assessment.