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Social mobility at the top and the higher education system

Elise S. Brezis, Joël Hellier



European Journal of  
POLITICAL ECONOMY

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PII: S0176-2680(16)30116-1

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2017.04.005>

Reference: POLECO1643

To appear in: *European Journal of Political Economy*

Received date: 5 August 2016

Revised date: 21 November 2016

Accepted date: 14 April 2017

Cite this article as: Elise S. Brezis and Joël Hellier, Social mobility at the top and the higher education system, *European Journal of Political Economy* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2017.04.005>

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## SOCIAL MOBILITY AT THE TOP AND THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Elise S. Brezis<sup>1</sup>, Joël Hellier<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Director, Azrieli Center for Economic Policy (ACEP), Bar-Ilan University, Israel.<sup>2</sup>LEM-CNRS (UMR 9221) and LEMNA, Univ. de Nantes, France.

elise.brezis@biu.ac.il

joel.hellier@wanadoo.fr

**Abstract**

This paper relates social mobility and social stratification to the structure of higher education. We develop an intergenerational model which shows that a two-tier higher education characterised by a division between elite and standard universities can be a key factor in generating permanent social stratification, social immobility and self-reproduction of the 'elite'. In our approach, low mobility at the top is essentially explained by the differences in quality and in selection between elite and standard universities.

A key result is that the wider the quality gap and the difference in per-student expenditures between elite and standard universities, the less social mobility. This is because a larger quality gap reinforces the weight of family backgrounds at the expense of personal ability. Our simulations show that this impact can be large. These findings provide theoretical bases for the differences in social mobility at the top observed between advanced countries.

**Keywords:** Elite, Higher Education, Intergenerational mobility, Social stratification.

**JEL Classification:** I21, J62, O15, Z13.

**1. Introduction**

This paper relates social mobility and social stratification to the structure of higher education. We show that a two-tier higher education characterised by a division between elite and standard universities leads to permanent social stratification, social immobility and self-reproduction of the elite. In our approach, low mobility at the top is essentially explained by differences in quality and in selection between elite and standard universities.

Democratization in higher education is a world-wide phenomenon. In most advanced economies, the share in a generation of the individuals pursuing tertiary education has

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