

## ABSTRACT

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# Inheriting higher education - how do attitudes to higher education differ between Swedes from academic and non-academic backgrounds?

## Introduction

Students from non-academic backgrounds have been underrepresented in Swedish higher education for over a decade, and more knowledge is needed about the process by which this underrepresentation is maintained. A recent report from the Swedish Higher Education Authority found that 69% of all students born in 1991 that had at least one parent with three years of higher education transitioned to higher education, whereas the corresponding figure for students from non-academic backgrounds was 22% (Universitetskanslerämbetet 2017a). Underrepresentation of students from non-academic backgrounds has been consistent at this level for the last ten cohorts born between 1981 and 1991 (Universitetskanslerämbetet 2017a). International research shows that students who come from non-academic homes have lower expectations of studying in higher education, and that their expectations plummet faster than others do (Anders and Micklewright 2015). How positive and negative expectations are formed early in life, and reinforced, is thus of interest for widening access to higher education. Widening access interventions targeting non-academic families is a priority for stakeholders involved in widening access, but for effective interventions, data is needed that illuminates the concrete processes which create and maintain this longstanding societal division. In 2016 the Swedish Council for Higher education published a national survey of how Swedish higher education institutions work with widening access and widening participation (Swedish Council for Higher Education 2016) which found that although many initiatives are taken in these areas, few focus on primary school. In 2017, the Swedish council for Higher Education conducted an internet survey regarding attitudes to higher education in Sweden, in order to learn more about possible differences that could illuminate how a tentative process could be conceptualized. In this study, we report the findings of the survey that directly pertain to the importance of parental academic background.

## Method

The study methodology, which is well established in Sweden in national surveys, entails recurring randomization until a 1 000 answers have been received, distributed evenly along pre-selected population characteristics. T-tests were then performed to examine whether a difference between the study subgroups was statistically significant with 95% probability ( $p < .05$ ). Only significant differences are presented, both for differences in population characteristics and for survey results.

### Population characteristics

A 1 000 randomly recruited Swedish citizens between the ages of 19 and 64 answered the survey online, with a response rate of 34,6% ( $n=2\ 890$ ) Data on parental education was available for 972 participants. Gender and age for the two groups studied here is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Distribution of gender and age by parents educational background**

Background	Women	Men	N	19-29	30-49	50-64
Academic	83	113	196	83	84	28
Non-academic	263	286	549	95	238	216

In the survey, all participants stated their highest education level, but only participants from non-academic backgrounds reported the lowest education level - 14% had only two years of secondary school, compared to none of the participants from academic backgrounds (0%). Almost half (48%) of those from academic backgrounds lived in one of Sweden's three largest cities, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. More than half (58%) of those from non-academic backgrounds lived in smaller cities (population >3000) compared to those from academic backgrounds (45%). More participants from non-academic backgrounds (17%) lived in low-populated areas (<3000) compared to participants from academic backgrounds (7%).

### Survey results

Participants from academic backgrounds more often reported having received information about higher education in primary school (21%) than those from non-academic backgrounds (12%). Participants from academic backgrounds were also informed about higher education to a higher degree in secondary school (52%) than those from non-academic backgrounds (31%). Participants from academic backgrounds reported having very good grades in primary school to a higher degree (58%) than those from non-academic backgrounds (32%). Participants from academic backgrounds also reported having very good grades in secondary school to a higher degree (47%) than those from non-academic backgrounds (29%). Reasons for not entering higher education differed between groups. Those from non-academic backgrounds cited wanting to start work as quickly as possible more often (46%) than those who came from academic backgrounds (21%). As for reasons to enter higher education, participants from academic backgrounds cited being advised by their families to do so to a higher degree (33%) than those from non-academic backgrounds (11%). Another reason to enter higher education was going to a school where transition to higher education was common. Participants from academic backgrounds stated more often (11%) that this was a

reason to transition to higher education, than participants from non-academic backgrounds (1%). Participants from academic backgrounds also cited a general interest in higher studies more often (58%) than those from non-academic backgrounds (40%).

Participants with non-academic backgrounds (43%) thought it was more important that their higher education provider was close to their home, compared to those from academic backgrounds (26%). The status of the higher education provider, on the other hand, was more important for those from academic backgrounds (38%) than for those from non-academic backgrounds (25%). Long distance learning was more of an option for participants from non-academic backgrounds (74%) than for those from academic backgrounds (66%). Participants from academic backgrounds were more interested in doctoral studies (58%) than those from non-academic backgrounds (28%).

It was more common for participants from academic backgrounds to drop out of higher education (23%) than those from non-academic backgrounds (13%). However, when dropping out, it was more common for non-academic students to do so because life circumstances made it difficult to complete higher education (32%) than for those from academic backgrounds (13%).

Both groups considered higher education equally important for getting a job in the current work market, and both groups found salary level employment from higher education to be equally important.

## **Discussion**

The study provides data that illustrate the systemic vulnerability of children born in non-academic families, from which a tentative outline of the process which reproduces academic backgrounds in Sweden emerges. Swedish citizens from academic backgrounds, with two parents with higher education, seems to be a group that has an advantage throughout all education cycles, from primary school to possible doctoral studies. Participants from academic backgrounds reported receiving information about higher education more often both in primary and secondary school, as well as very good grades, and more often attended schools where transition to higher education was common. They also reported more often being encouraged by their parents to enter higher education and more often prioritized entering higher education after upper secondary school rather than working. They also considered the status of higher education providers in their choice of higher education institution more often, were more willing to move to study, and were more interested in doctoral studies. This indicates both how their knowledge of the academic system is formed and supported by their background, as well as how this reinforces their belief in the value of higher education, and provides academic self-confidence to enter it.

The study findings are supported by previous research on how Swedish students relate to higher education, depending on background. Swedish students with low social capital tend to choose higher education institution based on convenience principles, with a lower degree of academic self-confidence, whereas students with high social capital take into account how an institution's status affects their career opportunities, and make their choices with a high degree of academic self-confidence (Beach and Puaca 2015).

A quantitative UK study found a strong link between having the will to study in higher education before the age of 14 and to actually enter higher education (Anders and Micklewright 2015). The finding in this study that children from non-academic backgrounds often receive their first formal information about higher education later than children from

academic families, is thus particularly troubling. All Swedish primary schools are legally obliged to balance disadvantages due to social background, primarily by way of curriculum integrated career and guidance counselling (Skolverket 2014). Despite this, inspections of primary schools made by the Swedish School Inspectorate have repeatedly found that primary schools do not follow the law in this regard (Skolinspektionen 2010). Most Swedish pupils tend to receive their first career and guidance counselling in upper secondary school, if at all. Although all children in Sweden are affected by the uneven distribution of career and guidance counseling in the Swedish school system, children from academic backgrounds may receive extra early counselling at home that compensates for this, which the results suggested. In this sense, higher education can be seen as something that is passed on from generation to generation, or that is inherited.

However, this study also indicates that Swedish students from non-academic backgrounds are less likely to drop out of higher education once they have entered it than students from academic backgrounds. A recent statistical analysis by the Swedish Higher Education Authority found no differences in completion rate in higher education programs due to non-academic background, instead final grade average from secondary school predicted drop out (Universitetskanslersämbetet 2017b). Although the results presented by the Swedish Higher Education Authority were restricted to a selection of programs leading to professional qualifications, they indicate that those who have entered the educational system fare as well as students from academic backgrounds, depending on their upper secondary grades. It is thus somewhat alarming that participants with an academic background more often perceived their grades from secondary school to be very high, than those from non-academic backgrounds. The question the Swedish educational system as a whole needs to consider is how to widen access for Swedes from non-academic backgrounds who do not at the moment transcend the barriers to entering higher education described here. This means making sure information about higher education reaches them early, to make sure adequate academic support is given to them in primary and secondary school, that higher education in general, and doctoral studies in particular is humanized and made less inaccessible. Widening participation interventions targeting those students from non-academic backgrounds that have entered higher education might do well to target life circumstances, as this is one dropout reason that is more prevalent for them than for students from academic backgrounds.

## References

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