

PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: German evidence of information workshops boosting university applications from disadvantaged young people

Giving disadvantaged school students more information about the costs and returns of higher education makes them more likely to apply. That is the central finding of research by **Frauke Peter** and **Vaishali Zambre**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Mannheim in August 2015. They conclude that tailored information workshops are an inexpensive policy tool for narrowing the gap in take-up of university education.

The study looks at a project where students at some Berlin schools were given an information workshop a year before high school graduation. Students learned how much money they need and how much more they could earn, including lifetime earnings potential and employment risks. Low-income students were also told how they could find funding.

The researchers find that the workshops made young people from non-academic family backgrounds more willing to go to university. At the same time, less capable students from academic family backgrounds became less willing to go. The authors conclude:

‘Educational inequality can be reduced by providing students with relevant information. At the same time as addressing inequality of opportunities, such policies help to reduce skills mismatches in the economy.’

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Educational inequality at the transition to university can be reduced by providing high school students with relevant information about the returns, costs and funding options for higher education. This is the result of new research by Frauke Peter and Vaishali Zambre, education researchers at the Department of Education and Family at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin), one of the leading economic research institutions in Germany.

Despite increasing access to university education, students from disadvantaged family backgrounds are still underrepresented in universities in many countries. ‘Providing students from a non-academic family background with relevant information increases their intention to study’, says Vaishali Zambre, who presented her findings at the 2015 annual meeting of the European Economic Association (EEA).

Previous evidence shows that post-secondary education decisions depend first and foremost on parents’ educational background. ‘Students tend to follow the educational path of their parents’, says Frauke Peter, and ‘in most European countries, university education is free of charge; therefore difficulties in financing university studies are less likely to explain the gap in transition probabilities by educational background’, adds Vaishali Zambre.

In their study, the two economists analyse whether a lack of information about university education might explain the observed differences in post-secondary education choices.

The presented study is part of a larger project called 'Berliner-Studienberechtigten-Panel (Best Up),' which is being jointly conducted at DIW Berlin and the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB). For this project, students at some upper secondary schools in Berlin participated in an information workshop one year prior to high school graduation.

During this workshop, students learned how much money the average university student needs to finance living expenses and what differences in labour market returns can be accrued with a university degree compared with a vocational degree.

For example, students were shown differences in lifetime earnings and unemployment risks according to level of education. Since financing living expenses is more difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the main sources of funding were also introduced during the information workshop.

The two economists examine the short-term treatment effect of providing information provision and find that the information workshop increases the intention to study for students from a non-academic family background. At the same time, the researchers find that the workshop lowered the study intention for less capable students from academic family backgrounds.

The results of this study suggest that educational inequality can be reduced by providing students with relevant information, which at the same time improves post-secondary education matches.

It is important to discuss the gap in educational attainment by family background not only from the angle of inequality of opportunities, but also with regard to the associated loss of efficiency through a mismatch of skills. In countries with a decreasing labour force, in particular, the efficient use of human capital resources gains in importance.

The authors conclude that 'a tailored information workshop may indeed be an appropriate and inexpensive policy tool to narrow the gap in take-up of tertiary education.'

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For further information, see:

http://www.diw.de/en/diw_01.c.392138.en/research_advice/public_finances_and_living_conditions/education_and_family/research_projects/research_projects.html?id=diw_01.c.409542.en

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