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## **Changing Educational Aspirations in the Choice of and Transition to Post-Compulsory Schooling—A Three-Wave Longitudinal Study of Oslo Youth**

### Introduction

Access to higher education for all is an ethos in many education regimes and at the same time an expectation that our schooled society have naturalized in the population as education levels have risen (Baker 2011). Currently, an astonishingly high and increasing share of young people aspire to higher education (Hegna 2010; Kao and Thompson 2003; Reynolds *et al.* 2006), including many low achievers who lack the educational resources needed to complete a college or university degree. It has been well documented that educational aspirations carries a resource value in the quest for higher education. For instance, young people who aspire to college in the US have been found to be more likely to attend college (Morgan 2005; Reynolds *et al.* 2006). Thus, aspirations are of potential significance for educational choice and later completion of higher education. From a societal perspective, then, high educational aspirations can be seen as desirable, as they can contribute to an increase in the educational level of the population. However, high educational aspirations may be ambiguous for individuals.

Young people's educational aspirations reflect individuals' subjective perceptions of personal capabilities and external opportunities, and they are influenced by personal and societal characteristics, including gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Hodkinson and

Sparkes 1997; Lee and Rojewski 2009; McClelland 1990). This understanding emphasizes that educational aspirations are changeable orientations influenced by a combination of structural background characteristics and assessments of capabilities, opportunities, resources and barriers during adolescence. Central to this understanding is the idea that aspirations are simultaneously reflections of young people's past and their vision for the future. With the transition from a comprehensive compulsory education to a differentiating upper secondary education, young people in Norway are compelled to look ahead and to make decisions about their future educational path. How do educational choice and the transition to upper secondary school affect their educational aspirations?

Erikson and Rudolphi (2010) claim that the mechanism behind the secondary effects of educational choice on class differentials in education are best understood as a consequence of active, rational choices made by children and their parents, although class differentials are also influenced by the primary effects of class differentials in school achievement (Erikson and Rudolphi 2010). From this perspective, changes in educational aspirations should primarily be understood as a consequence of rational evaluations of school achievement, ability, cost–benefit analyses and class-linked constraints on resources and relevant information (Jackson *et al.* 2007). For Bourdieu (1973), on the other hand, aspirations represent an “internalization of objective probabilities for success” (Bourdieu 1973, cited in McClelland 1990), because they are a key component of one's world-view, which derive from past experiences and socialization processes. These orientations include cultural capital—which is also a part of one's ability to achieve—and are influenced by structural constraints of e.g. educational institutions. Following these two conflicting perspectives, changes in young peoples' educational aspirations could be seen as either unproblematic and necessary or illegitimate and unwanted. If students temper their aspirations based on evaluations of their previous achievements and school effort, one could argue that such a change was rational

(Boudon 1974; Breen and Goldthorpe 2000). However, if patterns in students' changing aspirations are related to structural characteristics, then these processes could be seen as less legitimate and warrant investigations into how these patterns could be explained (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). This is especially true in Norway, where universalistic ideologies underpin the educational system and the levelling of structural inequalities in education is an explicit goal (Büchtemann and Verdier 1998; The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2012).

Based on longitudinal data from two educational contexts at three time points, we analyse changes in young people's educational aspirations from ages 14/15 to 17/18. Our data map young people's aspirations for higher education before they need to make a choice about upper secondary education, when they make the choice, and then well into the educational track that they choose. Can changes in educational aspirations be explained by individual factors such as poor or declining achievement and school engagement, or do structural characteristics such as gender, social class and immigrant background contribute to the explanation over and above these individual factors? After a description of the theoretical background for the study and theoretical perspectives on aspirations and transitions, we present a brief description of Norway's educational system and its underlying ideologies.

### Transitions, choice and changing aspirations

The transition from a local compulsory school to a post-compulsory school is an important change for most young people, and could be interpreted as a turning point representing a shift in identity (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). Thus, assessments of their educational aspirations are made in very different contexts before and after this transition. Not only do educational institutions differ but also the decision processes that take place at the end of compulsory

education may lead to rational evaluations, cause students to solicit family advice and raise identity issues that were not as relevant just a year before the transition.

Aspirations are formed in childhood and are subject to change throughout the life course. Rather than assuming that aspirations are predictable and develop in a linear manner in youth, aspirations should be seen in relation to the institutional and life-stage contexts of young people (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). Haller (1968) and Lewin's (1939) terms ideal/idealistic and real/realistic aspirations point to a process of changing aspirations from what one hopes to attain if all goes well to what one might really be able to attain. A decline in occupational aspirations may reflect young people's growing realism and awareness of a need to compromise their ambitions (Furlong and Biggart 1999; Shapka *et al.* 2006) as they assess their chances of success.

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) call the process by which young people decide about their careers and education "pragmatic-rational". The young people in their study were rational in the sense that they evaluated their own experience and listened to advice before making a decision, and they were pragmatic in the sense that their decision-making was context related (family background, culture and life histories). The authors' use of Bourdieu's theory of habitus highlights the idea that aspirations are subjective but are also influenced by objective social networks and cultural traditions and that people make career decisions within particular horizons that are set according to social class background, gender and ethnicity (pp. 33-34). Young people's decision-making and choice of upper secondary education take place in the intersection between their own experiences, family strategies and institutional processes and conventions. Understanding changing educational aspirations in this period and contrasting them to changing educational aspirations in a different context may reveal important aspects of this decision-making process.

Aspirations to pursue higher education have repeatedly been shown to be influenced by structural factors such as gender, social background, parents' level of education and minority status (Irwin 2009; Qian and Blair 1999; Sletten 2011), with higher aspirations among girls (Mello 2008; Schoon *et al.* 2007) and middle-class/high socio-economic status (SES) students (see e.g., Bates *et al.* 2009; Schoon *et al.* 2007; Sletten 2011). Minority youth in Norway have been shown to have higher educational aspirations than their majority peers (Bakken and Sletten 2000; Hegna 2010; Lauglo 2000), and they also pursue tertiary education to a greater degree (Støren 2005; Støren 2009) after social class background is controlled for. However, the combination of high aspirations and lower grades among minority students often raises the concern that minority youth are unrealistic and that their aspirations will easily wane if barriers are encountered (Bakken and Sletten 2000).

Newer qualitative contributions to research on changing aspirations in youth in Britain have focused on classed, gendered and ethnic dispositions and identities, and they have suggested that academic attainment and feedback could spur rational decisions leading to different conclusions by different groups (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Shah *et al.* 2010; Winterton and Irwin 2012). Comparing students with high aspirations, Hanson (1994) found that low SES youth in general reduced their aspirations to a greater extent than high SES youth after finishing high school, thus indicating that low SES students' aspirations may be more precarious. Analysing an older age group than in the present study (12th grade to 22 years), Alexander *et al.* (2008) found that "cooling out" higher education aspirations was related to race (Caucasian) and low socio-demographic and academic resources. These studies suggest that when higher education aspirations are supported by highly educated parents, they could be harder than those of less advantaged students, either because the advantaged students experience declining achievement less often or because they withstand challenges such as

declining school achievement better. These questions have rarely been investigated in longitudinal quantitative studies, particularly in a Nordic context.

### The transition to upper secondary school in a universalist educational regime

Theorists from different perspectives have described the Norwegian welfare, educational and youth transition systems as characterized by a *universalist regime* (Esping-Anderson 1990; Verdier 2008; Walther 2006). Ensuring access to higher education for all is a fundamental convention underlying Norway's post-compulsory educational policies (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2012). Andreas Walther describes the Nordic transition regime as being based firstly on a comprehensive school system—standardized but sufficiently flexible to allow for individual learning and training plans—and secondly on educational choice supported by institutionalized counselling that “primarily is orientated so as to reinforce individuals’ motivation for personal development” (Walther 2006, p. 127).

In line with the social conventions of a universalist education regime (Verdier 2008), several traits of the Norwegian educational system are intended to ensure equal opportunity for higher education for all and to avoid irreversible tracking in upper secondary school. The first 10 years of compulsory schooling are comprehensive, and all students receive the same education. The grading of school work is introduced as late as the eighth grade, and sorting of students according to achievement is seen as somewhat problematic. All students—whether they have passed lower secondary school or not—have the right to enter upper secondary school until the age of 24.

At the end of compulsory school, young Norwegians are faced with a choice between nine vocational and three general upper secondary school study programmes<sup>1</sup>. In principle, access to schools and the choice between the 12 study programmes is not restricted by any requirement for a minimum achievement level or acceptance examination, and students have ample opportunities to switch from vocational to general studies during their upper secondary education. To ensure that all students have enough information and competence to make a “good” and “rational” choice according to their interests and options, lower secondary school devotes a subject curriculum and 115 teaching hours to the school subject *Selection of education competence*. This subject includes school and work-place visits during the first two years, information stands, education fairs and personal counselling by a designated school career counsellor during the final year. However, perhaps because the sorting mechanisms of the school system are down-played in Norwegian public discourse, the selection process and counselling by secondary school advisors stresses young people’s own interests, “personality” and needs rather than their previous achievement or perceived ability to complete their chosen programme of education (Buland *et al.* 2011). Rather than offering clear decision-making advice, counsellors give the students relevant information and try to help them find out “who they are” and what their vision of their future is. This lack of institutional steering of youth leaves more room for individual choice than in many other European countries.

Eric Verdier describes the universalist educational regime as being based on a social convention of solidarity with the aim of compensating for inequalities between students from

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<sup>1</sup> The general education study programmes that give direct access to tertiary education are: *General Studies; Music, Dance and Drama; and Sports and Physical Education*. These programmes require three years of mostly in-school education. The vocational study programme model consists of two years in school and a two-year apprenticeship. Traditional VET programmes include: *Building and Construction; Health Care; Childhood and Youth Development; Electricity and Electronics; Service and Transport; Technical and Industrial Production; and Restaurant and Food Processing*. Among students in modern VET programmes such as *Design, Arts and Crafts, Media and Communication and Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry*, many students choose a third supplementary year of theoretical education over apprenticeship, thus gaining the higher education access certificate in three years.

privileged and less privileged family backgrounds (Verdier 2008, pp. 206–207). Given this intention to reduce inequalities in schooling, sharp differences in educational aspirations based on social background or a greater inclination to temper aspirations among lower-class students would be seen as problematic in Norway, as would differences based on gender or ethnicity. At the same time, the openness of, and the encouragement for individual responsibility in, the choice of upper secondary education of the Norwegian system puts greater weight on individual self-reflection and choice. This could lead to a pattern in which rational assessments of strengths and weaknesses, merit and engagement result in reduced aspirations for those with unrealistic or ideal aspirations of higher education. Following this reasoning, we argue that individual factors such as these must be viewed in the context of background characteristics like gender, immigrant background and social class to be able to see which factors contribute to lowered educational aspirations in youth.

Once they make a choice, students in the 12 study programmes will eventually lead quite different school lives for the next 3–4 years with respect to syllabi, subjects and training, the make-up of the student body and the “institutional habitus” (Reay, David & Ball 2001) of the schools offering the programmes. For most of the students in Oslo (about 75%), their upper secondary years will be in general studies programmes that lead to a higher education admission certificate. For the rest of the students, the VET programmes vary greatly in difficulty and gendering. These unequal institutional contexts may affect educational aspirations differently during the upper secondary school years. Because students choose schools and study programmes partly on the basis of their gender, social background and ethnic background, we can expect that educational aspirations during this period also may be affected according to such structural differences.

## Research questions

The central research question of this study is what characterizes young people who reduce their educational aspirations. We compare two important periods of their schooling: the last year of compulsory education and the first year and a half of their upper secondary school. Our data allow us to separate these two periods that are marked by differing processes and institutional contexts of educational choice and transition and thus to analyse whether these contexts affect changes in aspirations differently. First, we analyse the effects of poor and lowered achievement and school effort on changes in aspirations during each period. Second, we analyse the importance of the students' structural background, including gender, social class and immigrant background. Importantly, individual educational resource factors and structural background factors need to be analysed together. Our main research question is thus: *What role do individual educational resource factors and structural background characteristics play in reduced higher education aspirations during educational choice and the transition to upper secondary school.* In addition, to understand what happens to minority youth with higher education aspirations despite lower initial grades, we analyse the relationship between aspirations and grades for minority youth in particular.

As the results unfold, we will see the contours of different mechanisms for changes in educational aspirations at play during the first period relative to the second period. The results can be interpreted as an indication of how educational aspirations are affected differently during the decision-making process prior to the transition to upper secondary school compared with how they are affected during the hands-on experience period after students move into the study programmes of their choice.

## Method

### *Sample*

This study is based on a longitudinal data set from youth in public schools in Oslo who were born in 1992. There were three waves of data collection from 2006 to 2010. The first wave of data collection was during the autumn of 2006 (first term, ninth grade—the second year of lower secondary school), before the students in general had begun to prepare for their educational choice. The second wave of data collection occurred 16–20 months later, in the spring of 2008 (second term, tenth grade—the last year of lower secondary school), starting the day after application for upper secondary education. The third wave of data collection was during the winter of 2009/2010 (the second term of the second year of upper secondary school, 18–25 months later). All three waves of data collection were conducted in a school setting, ensuring privacy.

Invitations to participate in the study were sent to all ordinary lower secondary schools<sup>2</sup> in Oslo and distributed to all of the students born in 1992. Seven schools (with a total of 744 students) declined to participate. We solicited consent to participate from the students and their parents at each of the three waves of data collection. The initial number of consenting participants was 2416, constituting a sample of 57 per cent of the population of interest. The response rate at T1 was 96.4 per cent ( $N(T1) = 2328$ ). At T2, 2028 of the consenting respondents completed the survey, a response rate of 83.9 per cent. Between T2 and T3, the respondents began attending their new upper secondary school, and they had to be located and

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<sup>2</sup> Most students in Norway attend public schools for compulsory schooling. In Oslo, only four per cent of pupils attend private schools (SSB 2000). In this study, private schools were approached, and six schools accepted the invitation. These included three religious schools, one international school and two schools with alternative educational philosophies (Waldorf/Montessori) with a total of 148 students participating from an approximate total of 440. In Oslo, there are also a number of schools for children with special needs. These were not included.

their e-mail addresses had to be obtained before the third survey could be conducted. This impeded data collection at T3, but after extensive interactions with appointed school contacts, email reminders to respondents, and (eventually) telephone contact, responses were obtained from 1855 respondents at T3. This represents 77.8 per cent of the original group of consenting students. The number of students participating in all three waves of data collection was 1555, an overall participation rate of 64.4 per cent. To investigate changing aspirations, the present analyses are based on data from students who participated at both T1 and T2 (N = 1913), and data from students who participated at both T2 and T3 (N = 1660), respectively.

The students in the selected sample in this study were similar in gender and ethnic composition to a representative sample of students in ninth- and tenth-grade classes in lower secondary schools (Young in Oslo 2006), but they were slightly more likely to be of high socio-economic status. Thirty-three per cent of the original sample dropped out during the study. Attrition analysis shows that the drop-out rate was higher among students with poor achievement in school (49 per cent) or no aspiration to higher education (43 per cent) and students with self-reported prior criminal and/or antisocial behaviour (46 per cent).

### *Variables*

#### Dependent variable

Decreasing higher education aspirations. We asked the same simple question about whether students wanted to “go on to further education after finishing upper secondary school” at each of the three time points. We used a simple question because we believed that the respondents would not be able to give detailed answers about their educational aspirations at T1, when they were 13–14 years old. The response alternatives were: *No*; *Yes, a higher education of short duration (2–4 years)*; and *Yes, a higher education of long duration (5+ years)*. A

decrease in higher education aspirations was defined as a change from “long” to “short”/”No” or from “short” to “No” from time T1 to T2 or from time T2 to T3 (see Figure 1).

#### Table 1 about here

#### Covariates

Structural background variables. The students’ ethnic background was categorized according to information on parents’ country of birth reported at all three time points. Minority young people were defined as those students with two parents who were born abroad (24–25 per cent). Seventy-one per cent of these students were born in Norway (“second-generation immigrants”). Social class background was based on information about the father’s occupation at T2, or in cases of missing information, the mother’s occupation. Occupations were coded according to ISCO-88 and categorized into three groups, partly based on Goldthorpe’s class scheme (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1980). A category of unknown social class was included for cases in which the student’s father was outside the work-force (unemployed/on social welfare/dead) and when there was no information on parents’ occupation or their labour force relationship. A question about gender was included at each of the three time points.

Individual educational resources. To measure *achievement*, self-reported school marks in Norwegian language and literature, English language and literature, and mathematics were obtained at each time point. Scores ranged from 1 to 6. A score of 1 indicates failure to pass the course, 2 is the lowest passing mark and 6 is the highest mark. There is a tendency for students to report slightly higher marks than they actually receive, but self-reported marks correlate highly with actual marks and are therefore sufficiently accurate for research purposes (Cassady 2001; Dornbusch *et al.* 1990). To assess effort, we asked students at each

time point to report the amount of *homework* they did on a seven-point scale that ranged from “I get no homework” to “I do homework for more than three hours a day”.

Individual educational resource changes. Changes in homework and grades were calculated by subtracting the T1 score from the T2 score (T2-T1), or the T2 score from the T3 score (T3-T2). Negative values were categorized as a *decrease*, positive values were categorized as an *increase*, and a value of 0 indicates stability.

Chosen/attended study programmes. The 12 available study programmes were categorized into three groups: General education study programme (61 per cent), which awards students with a higher education admission certificate; Modern vocational study programmes (23 per cent), which combine practical/aesthetic education with general studies and also awards a higher education admission certificate at the conclusion; and finally, Traditional vocational education and training programmes (15 per cent), which combine school-based education and on the job training in apprenticeships. Students in traditional VET could achieve a higher education admission certificate by changing tracks after the second year.

Descriptive statistics for all of the covariates are shown in Table 1.

### *Analyses*

We used SPSS19 to perform cross-tabulations and multivariate logistic regressions. Only those respondents with potential for decreasing higher education aspirations were selected for analysis (Figure 1, Table 2). Thus, in the T1 to T2 change logistic regression analyses, those respondents indicating decreased aspirations between T1 and T2 were compared with those indicating “short” or “long” higher education aspirations at T1 (N = 1587). Likewise, in the T2 to T3 change logistic regression analyses, those respondents indicating decreasing

aspirations between T2 and T3 were compared with those indicating “short” and “long” higher education aspirations at T2 (N = 1485). For the T1 to T2 analyses, 8 per cent of the respondents were missing, and 9 per cent of the respondents were omitted; for the T2 to T3 analyses, 10.5 per cent were omitted (missing information or indicating no higher education aspirations at T1 or T2).

All relationships between the dependent and independent variables were analysed with bivariate logistic regressions and multivariate logistic regressions (Table 3). The first model (model A) included individual educational resource variables (achievement and school effort) and change variables. The second model (model B) added the structural background variables: gender, social class and immigrant background. Particular attention was given to changing aspirations among minority young people (Table 4) and the role of study programme choice.

## Results

Our first step was to understand patterns of educational aspirations at the three time points and changes in these aspirations over time. If we look at the students’ answers at each time point independently, we find that the proportions reporting shorter or longer higher education aspirations at each of the three time points are rather stable (Figure 1, percentage inside box). At each time point, about 10 per cent have no higher education aspirations, one-third aspire to a short tertiary education (32–38 per cent) and about half aspire to a long tertiary education (58–53 per cent). When we analyse individual changes in aspirations, however, we see that a significant number of respondents changed aspirations during the two interim periods (Figure 1, percentages by the arrows). As Table 2 shows, during these two periods, 16.4 and 17.7 per cent lowered their aspirations, and 15.5 and 14.1 per cent raised their aspirations (T1 to T2 and T2 to T3, respectively). Of the respondents who were included in all three waves of data

collection, 48.1 per cent had stable educational aspirations over the three years. In the “no higher aspirations” group, only 22.8 per cent stayed with their initial answer, whereas a much higher percentage of the respondents with long higher education aspirations maintained their aspirations. Thus, what appears to be stability in cross-sectional comparisons is revealed as a relatively profound change in aspirations in this longitudinal analysis.

[Figure 1 and Table 2 about here](#)

In our next analyses, we describe the individual educational resources and structural background characteristics of the young people with decreasing educational aspirations. An initial bivariate analysis for the T1 to T2 transition period (not shown) showed that male respondents were slightly more likely to have decreasing aspirations (males: 18.7 %, females: 14.4%,  $p < .01$ ), whereas minority students were not (majority: 17.1 %, minority: 14.5 %, ns). Respondents with fathers in subordinate positions were also more likely to have decreasing aspirations than were students with fathers in executive or professional jobs. Among the latter, only 9 per cent reported decreasing aspirations, whereas 22 per cent of those with fathers in manual labour reported the same ( $p < .001$ ). During the T2 to T3 transition period, however, minority students were over-represented (majority: 16.4 %, minority: 22.0 %,  $p < .01$ ), whereas males and students from lower-class backgrounds were not. In addition, medium to low and decreasing grades, as well as decreasing school effort, were more strongly associated with decreasing aspirations than were high and increasing grades and increasing school effort in this transition period. Thus, if we compare the first and second periods, individual education resources seemed to have comparable importance, but the structural background characteristics appeared to be more important during the first period. However, this could be explained by the fact (for instance) that male students and students with working-class parents

had poorer grades. To understand this relationship more fully, a multivariate logistic regression was performed.

In the multivariate logistic regression analyses, only those students with a potential to lower their aspirations were included in the analysis. Hence, respondents with no aspirations at T1 (n = 326) were omitted in the T1 to T2 analyses, and respondents with no aspirations at T2 (n = 151) were omitted in the T2 to T3 analyses<sup>3</sup>. The individual educational resource variables were included in the first block as continuous variables. Categorical background variables were included in the second block, and the chosen/attended study programme was included in the third block (Table 3-1 and Table 3-2).

In the T1 to T2 transition period analyses, initial grades and decreasing effort and achievement predict decreasing aspirations (Table 3-1, model A), and this relationship is unaffected by the inclusion of background characteristics (Table 3-1, model B). This indicates that some boys, majority students and students from working-class backgrounds lowered their higher education aspirations over and above what would be expected by their low or declining school grades.

Controlling for social class background and individual education resources, a negative effect of minority background appears. Further analyses revealed that this was mostly explained by minority young people's lower initial grades and lower-class background. Thus, minority students had half the odds of lowering their aspirations in the transition to tenth grade and when choosing upper secondary education relative to the majority students, assuming that social background characteristics were the same for the two groups. Thus, minority students

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<sup>3</sup> To test whether the chosen strategy affected results, a sensitivity analysis was performed. The logistic regressions including all T1/T2 and T2/T3 respondents, respectively, and controlling for aspirations at the outset, showed the same overall patterns with somewhat stronger effects. The results are available upon request.

seem to hold on to their higher education aspirations in the decision-making process despite having their poorer grades and lower social class background working against them.

Table 3-1 and Table 3-2 about here

In the T2 to T3 transition period analysis, the individual educational resource variables were likewise associated with decreasing aspirations (Table 3-2, model A), even after controlling for background characteristics (Table 3-2, model B). However, including the background characteristics does not contribute significantly to the model in this analysis (step chi sq = 0.90, ns), and did not affect the relationships between decreasing aspirations and individual education resources in the full model. This means that there is no evidence that social class, ethnicity or gender have an effect on the likelihood of decreasing aspirations once educational resources (school effort and achievement) have been taken into account. Further analyses revealed that the bivariate difference between minority and majority youth previously found was explained mostly by their lower initial grades. For minority students, this should imply that the initial bivariate over-representation of minority youth in the decrease group in this period is explained by their lower initial grades at the start of upper secondary education.

To test whether the effect of achievement and school effort on decreasing higher education aspirations during the tenth-grade decision-making period is the result of the tendency for low-achieving and less-motivated students to choose vocational study programmes, the choice of study programme at T2 was controlled for in these associations (Table 3-1 Model C).

Including chosen study programme improved the model fit significantly, and it reduced the adjusted odds ratio (aOR) of other variables slightly. However, low initial grades, gender and social class background remained significant at the T1 to T2 transition period. Thus, choosing a vocational study programme explains some of the variation in decreasing aspirations among

students. However, poor grades, male gender and working-class background still explain decreasing aspirations over and above this.

Likewise, attending a vocational study programme could have an independent effect on decreasing aspirations during upper secondary education, and therefore we tested choice of study programme for the T2 to T3 transition period (Table 3-2 model C). In this analysis, the inclusion of study programme choice did not contribute significantly to the model (ns), and the effect size of other variables was not affected. Consequently, decreasing aspirations among students in VET and general study programmes alike were affected by poor and decreasing grades but not by the study programme they attended.

Previous cross-sectional research has shown that minority students in Norway have higher aspirations than do majority students when social background is controlled for. Despite lower grades and parents with lower levels of education, such students seek higher education at the same rate as majority students in Norway (Støren 2009). To understand the relationship between changes in grades and aspirations for minority students in particular, we tested minority and majority youth separately (Table 4). The multivariate analyses for the T1 to T2 decision process showed that both majority and minority youth have higher odds of lowering their higher education aspirations during the decision process if their grades were poor at T1. The results also indicated that decreasing grades from T1 to T2 doubled the odds of decreased aspirations among majority youth but not among minority youth, although the difference was not significant.

[Table 4 about here](#)

During the transition to upper secondary school, however, the effect of initial low grades at T2 was much stronger among minority than majority youth<sup>4</sup>. Decreasing grades from T2 to T3 were of comparable importance in lowering aspirations for both groups during this period. To summarize briefly, majority and minority students with poor grades and higher education aspirations in the ninth grade have similar odds of reducing their aspirations towards the end of the tenth grade. With *falling* grades, however, majority students were more prepared to “take the hint” and to compromise their aspirations as they made their choice of upper secondary school study programme. After a year and a half in upper secondary school, minority students who started with poor achievement results from lower secondary school (perhaps after holding on to their optimistic aspirations during the choice of study programme) were more likely to lower their aspirations than were majority students. Decreasing grades in the same period are an additional risk factor for lowering aspirations during upper secondary school for minority students. Thus, the decision process and the choice itself influence majority and minority students differently.

## Discussion

The three time points included in this study allow a detailed examination of the development of educational aspirations among young people through two periods marked by differing institutional contexts and processes. The first period was between the commencement of lower secondary school’s ninth grade through to the decision-making process of choosing an upper secondary school and study programme at the end of tenth grade. The second period was from the last months of lower secondary school through the students’ experiences in the

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<sup>4</sup> An aOR of 0.24 may seem unreasonably low. Few minority students have mean grades as low as 1 through 2.33 (N = 10), which could impair the regression analysis. Additional analyses including only students with grades 3 through 6, however, yielded aOR = .22. Among minority students in tenth grade with grades  $\leq 3$ , 50 per cent lowered their aspirations in the transition to upper secondary school, whereas only 8 per cent of students with grades  $\geq 5$  did the same.

first and second year of the programme that they chose for upper secondary school. Our data showed that these two processes influenced the majority of students' higher education aspirations. Second, a closer examination of the changes in aspirations through the transition to upper secondary school revealed that the characteristics of the two groups of "decreasers" were different. During the first period, structural background characteristics such as male gender, being a member of the ethnic majority and lower social class background contributed to lowered aspirations, as did individual educational resources such as poor school achievement and decreasing school effort. During the second period, social background variables such as social class and gender were only weakly related to decreasing aspirations. Instead, decreasing aspirations *after* the transition to upper secondary school were almost solely related to variables signalling diminishing effort and achievement in upper secondary school: low grades from compulsory schooling, decreasing grades in upper secondary school and no increase in homework effort.

Third, we found that, on the surface, minority youth appear to maintain their higher education aspirations to the same degree as majority youth during the decision-making of tenth grade. However, when we controlled for initial grades and social class background, we found that minority students were less likely than were majority students to lower their aspirations between T1 and T2. This means that they maintained their aspirations despite their lower grades and lower social class background. During the upper secondary school period, the minority youth appeared to be more likely to lower their aspirations than were the majority youth. Again, however, when we controlled for initial grades, the nature of this relationship changed, as minority and majority youths were equally likely to reduce their aspirations between T2 and T3. Consequently, minority youths' lower grades in compulsory school have a bigger impact on their aspirations as they make their transition to upper secondary school.

The fourth important finding was that the type of study programme also seems to be important in decreasing aspirations during the first but not the second period.

Taken together, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms involved in students' changing educational aspirations. By analysing changes in educational aspirations separately for the two periods in question, we see that while young people continually accumulate concrete scholastic competence and experiences, in the decision-making processes at the end of compulsory school, social background and gender play a different role in the development of educational aspirations than they do during the first years of upper secondary schooling.

#### *Changing aspirations during decision-making processes*

In a study on class differentials in the transition to A-Level courses in England and Wales, Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe and Yaish (2007) warned against making the error of ignoring Raymond Boudon's distinction between primary and secondary effects in educational attainment (Boudon 1974). In addition to focusing on the social class differences in performance that underlie class differentials in educational attainment, the study of class differences in the choices made by students has shown that up to half of attainment differences are related to this secondary effect (Jackson *et al.* 2007). The present study indicates that during the decision to pursue vocational or general studies (leading to or away from subsequent higher education studies), young people from working-class backgrounds lower their educational aspirations over and above what can be explained by poor initial performance, declining performance, and the nature of their chosen study programme. Thus, in addition to rational-pragmatic deliberations regarding performance and ability on the one hand, and the opportunities inherent in study programmes on the other, having a lower social class background and being male also contribute to lowering aspirations. It is reasonable to

interpret these structural effects on higher education aspirations as a possible underlying mechanism in the secondary effects of class differentials in educational choice.

However, Jackson *et al.* (2007) go on to say that understanding secondary effects as socio-culturally conditioned and as expressions of class habitus is to portray these choices as “not meaningful choices at all” (page 224). I would argue that interpreting young people’s aspirations and educational choices as pragmatic–rational (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) is to see both the rationality of the decisions and the influence of their background characteristics and institutional context.

For instance, the present study indicates that even when controlling for social background and previous school achievement, students with immigrant backgrounds are less likely to lower their educational aspirations during this decision-making process. Several studies both in Norway (Bakken and Sletten 2000; Støren 2005) and in the USA (MacLeod 1987; Mickelson 1990), for instance, have found that minority students or students with an immigrant background are more optimistic and have higher educational aspirations than majority students. Researchers have explained this by pointing to some immigrant groups’ stronger mobility drive (Leirvik 2010; Ogbu and Gibson 1991), family work ethic (Fuglerud and Engebriksen 2006) or parenting styles (Kao 2004). Likewise, expecting higher educational achievements of offspring has been found to be a more prominent part of middle-class family strategies than in working-class families’ (Ball *et al.* 2000; Lareau 2003; Reed-Dananay 1996). Previous research in the UK has also raised the concern that young people receive too little practical information and guidance about the consequences of pursuing particular occupational pathways (Beck *et al.* 2006). The authors claim that, as a result, “girls and boys from different ethnic backgrounds are finding it very difficult to conceptualize their employment futures other than in very traditional (perhaps even “safe”) ways (Beck *et al.*

2006, p. 682). Because of this lack of information, they are left to rely on “what they know (scant) and believe (habitus)”. These results show some of the different ways in which both resources and barriers associated with students’ background characteristics have important impacts on processes of educational choice.

In ninth grade, many young people will appear to have made up their minds about whether they want to pursue higher education in 3–5 years’ time. However, for many, information about the kinds of demands that must be met to get there and what a higher education entails is rather blurry. During counselling about upper secondary study programmes, counsellors will typically encourage students to make their own choice, as will their parents. In theory, all options are open to the students, regardless of their previous achievement. However, in reality, some study programmes will demand great effort and previous knowledge in order to pass, but this is often down-played in counselling (Smette in progress). So, although young people in Oslo generally receive massive amounts of information and personal counselling, initial knowledge about study programmes and later educational possibilities still differ between families of different class and ethnic backgrounds. Family and cultural values, educational orientation and knowledge all could give meaning to young students’ changing aspirations.

In Norwegian schools, educational choices are individualized; they are understood by students, parents and school advisors to be “free”, and the guidance offered by schools puts more weight on interests and values than on informing students about the constraints of poor achievement and the labour market (Smette in progress). At the same time, there are no tuition fees for a university education, and generous and inexpensive student loans are offered to all. Still, the effects of social class, gender and ethnicity are evident. Could it be that the social construction of educational choice as “free” leaves more room for identity issues and habitus-

related considerations to come to the fore? On the other hand, could this social construction give the *counsellor's* beliefs about, and expectations for, the students more impact? Presented with two girls with the same mediocre grades and a strong wish to work in the health sector—one with Norwegian-born middle-class parents and the other with Somali parents—would the advice be the same? Would the two girls have the same chance of success in general studies? A study of how tenth-grade students are counselled could reveal whether, under the guise of “free choice”, different expectations and class, gender or ethnic stereotypes play a part in the advice that counsellors offer their students.

*Evaluation of the consequences of choice—aspirations and rational compromise?*

The results of this study show that young people who lower their higher education aspirations during upper secondary education are primarily characterized by not working harder on their homework than before, by poorer initial grades, and worsening grades. This seems to be true regardless of study programme, gender, social class or immigrant background. During the decision-making before transition to upper secondary school, young people make compromises based on an evaluation of their individual educational resources but influenced by their gender and social background as well. It is very interesting that *after* students have chosen a study programme and upper secondary school, it is their accumulated scholastic experiences rather than social class background characteristics that affect the possible tempering or development of their educational aspirations. This contrast could not have been found, however, if the development of aspirations had been seen as linear and individual, rather than context dependent, as in the present study.

Choosing among the 12 study programmes at the end of lower secondary school sorts students into different pathways based partly on their gender and social background. Thus, one would expect that different institutional contexts—general studies versus VET, female-dominated

versus male-dominated classes, for instance—would affect students’ aspirations differently during their first years in upper secondary school. This is not the case, however. Rather, changes in effort and achievement are what affect lowered aspirations during this period. In contrast to the previous period in which the decision process was the context for changing aspirations, it would seem reasonable to interpret this as a consequence of rational, experience-driven evaluations of their future possibilities.

After the transition to upper secondary school (T2 to T3), minority students with low grades have almost double the probability of lowered aspirations compared with majority students. Previous studies based on this same data set have found that minority students are also more likely to report lower school satisfaction after the transition from lower to upper secondary school than are majority students, whose satisfaction with school increases in the same transition period (Frøyland and Gjerustad 2012, Hegna 2013). It may be that minority students with lower grades maintain their aspirations through the decision-making process at the end of tenth grade against the odds but then are “forced” to circumscribe their aspirations as they encounter an educational context in which they need to work even harder than before to succeed. As idealism turns to realism, the transition to upper secondary school seems to represent a negative turning point for some low-achieving minority students. According to Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), a turning point entails changes in identity. How do the loss of educational aspirations and decrease in school satisfaction affect the identity of these minority students in the transition to upper secondary school?

### *Limitations*

Although the results of this study have been tested for robustness, there are several possible limitations. First, the analyses may have been biased by the non-participation, non-response or attrition of the sampling and data collection procedures. Previous analyses have shown that

the original sample represented all relevant groups well, apart from a slight over-representation of the higher SES strata. Attrition during the study was slightly higher among poor-achieving students, those with no aspirations to higher education and those prone to problem behaviour. Although these groups are clearly of interest for the study, focusing on students with aspirations reduces the impact or possible bias of this attrition.

The analyses showed considerable changes in aspirations, as seen in Figure 1. Given that the respondents are young people in the midst of identity development and in transition to young adulthood, this variation could be interpreted as random statements, a symptom of the indecision and confusion of youth, and hence as measurement error. If this were the case, the present analysis would be a misinterpretation of the students' responses, as it treats each student's statement at each time point as a straightforwardly accurate indication of their aspirations. Interestingly, though, obvious patterns in these changes are shown through the analyses, pointing to the importance of both social background and school achievement. Thus, dismissing the changing aspirations as measurement error fails to acknowledge the underlying forces affecting what may seem to be random or unconscious responses.

We excluded those with the lowest aspirations at outset from the logistic regression analyses, as they had no chance of lowering their aspirations. This procedure could be problematic because it ignores the phenomenon of "regression to the mean". Students with high aspirations at one time point are more likely than others to have lower aspirations at the next time point. Because we did not control for level of aspiration at outset, this could have influenced the results. An alternative approach might have been to use a change score model to control for aspirations at the outset. Running the logistic regression models including the full sample and controlling for initial aspirations, however, did not affect the results greatly,

which underpins the robustness of the findings. Nevertheless, a change score model should be tested in future analyses.

### Conclusion

This longitudinal study shows that changes in aspirations to higher education among students must be seen as depending upon characteristics of the young people themselves as well as on the context in which educational plans are evaluated. The context for changes in aspirations is that of institutionalized decision-making and the “free” choice of education prior to the transition to upper secondary education, and that of experience and evaluation after this transition has taken place. These two contexts make various aspects of young people’s characteristics and experiences significant for changing their aspirations to higher education. During the counselling and decision-making process, males and those with a lower social background were more likely to lower their higher education aspirations, which indicates the importance of gendered and classed habituses for educational choice—and any later attainments that they may add, in line with the secondary effect of class (Boudon 1974). At the same time, low initial grades and choosing a vocational study programme were related to lowered aspirations, as would be expected, because this could be seen as rational. During the experience and evaluation process after the turning point, however, poor or decreasing grades and decreasing homework effort were predictors for the young people who lost or replaced their higher education aspirations.

The sociology of educational choice has often been described as marred by antagonism between perspectives, especially between the rational choice perspective of writers such as Breen and Goldthorpe (2000) and Boudon (1974) and the structuralist perspective of Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Based on Gambetta’s (1987) argument that there is

no reason to believe that individual decisions should be the result of a single mechanism, Tero Järvinen (1998) calls for research that combines various views of educational choice. The results of the present study indicate, as Järvinen (1998) suggests, that a number of mechanisms govern the choices that agents make at various educational stages in different educational contexts. In imagining their futures, young people draw on their previous experience and habitus, as conditioned by their backgrounds. A Bourdieu-inspired perspective that sees changes in aspirations as structured by the individuals' social class position, family capital and family strategies seems well suited to revealing the processes of choice and changing aspirations as young people with no experience of upper secondary education seek to chart their futures. Later, as they gain experience based on the choices that they made, young people may need to make compromises regarding their initial educational aspirations (i.e., given rational evaluations of their achievements in their new schools). Both before and after the transition to upper secondary education, evaluations of educational aspirations must be seen as pragmatic–rational (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), but different aspects of the context of this evaluation are decisive for young people. Young people's horizons for educational choice are strongly affected by their background and identity, and this affects their educational aspirations. The experiences that they have after a turning point, such as the transition to upper secondary school and the changes in identity it may entail, have consequences for their plans for higher education.

	T1 Descriptives	T2 Descriptives	Higher education aspirations (5+ years) at T1
<u>Background variables</u>			
Gender			
Female (ref)	54.1	55.7	60.7
Male	45.9	44.3	55.0
Ethnicity			
Majority (ref)	74.9	76.1	58.0
Minority	25.1	23.9	58.3
Social class background			
Exec. positions/profess. (ref)	27.6	29.2	68.7
Non-manual employees	39.1	38.9	56.9
Manual workers	23.4	23.6	51.1
Missing information	9.9	8.4	48.5
<u>Educational resources</u>			
Grades (1–6) mean	4.11	4.10	
High grades ( $\geq 4.34$ –, ref)	29.7	30.2	78.1
Med. grades (3.34–4.33)	43.5	46.3	56.8
Low grades ( $\leq 3.33$ )	18.9	23.5	31.6
Homework > 2 h per day	15.7	17.1	66.1
< 2 h per day	79.6	74.5	57.2
No homework	4.7	8.4	41.8
Study programme (chosen/attended)			
General education		61.2	69.7
Modern VET programme		23.4	44.9
Traditional VET programme		15.4	31.9
<u>Changes in educational resources</u>			
	T1 to T2	T2 to T3	
Grades Increase	30.1	42.7	
Stable	30.3	22.6	
Decrease	39.5	34.7	
Homework Increase	25.4	21.0	
Stable	36.7	31.8	
Decrease	37.9	47.2	

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for covariates, in percentages.  $N(T1/T2) = 1913$ .  $N(T2/T3) = 1660$ . Cohort born 1992, Oslo, Norway.

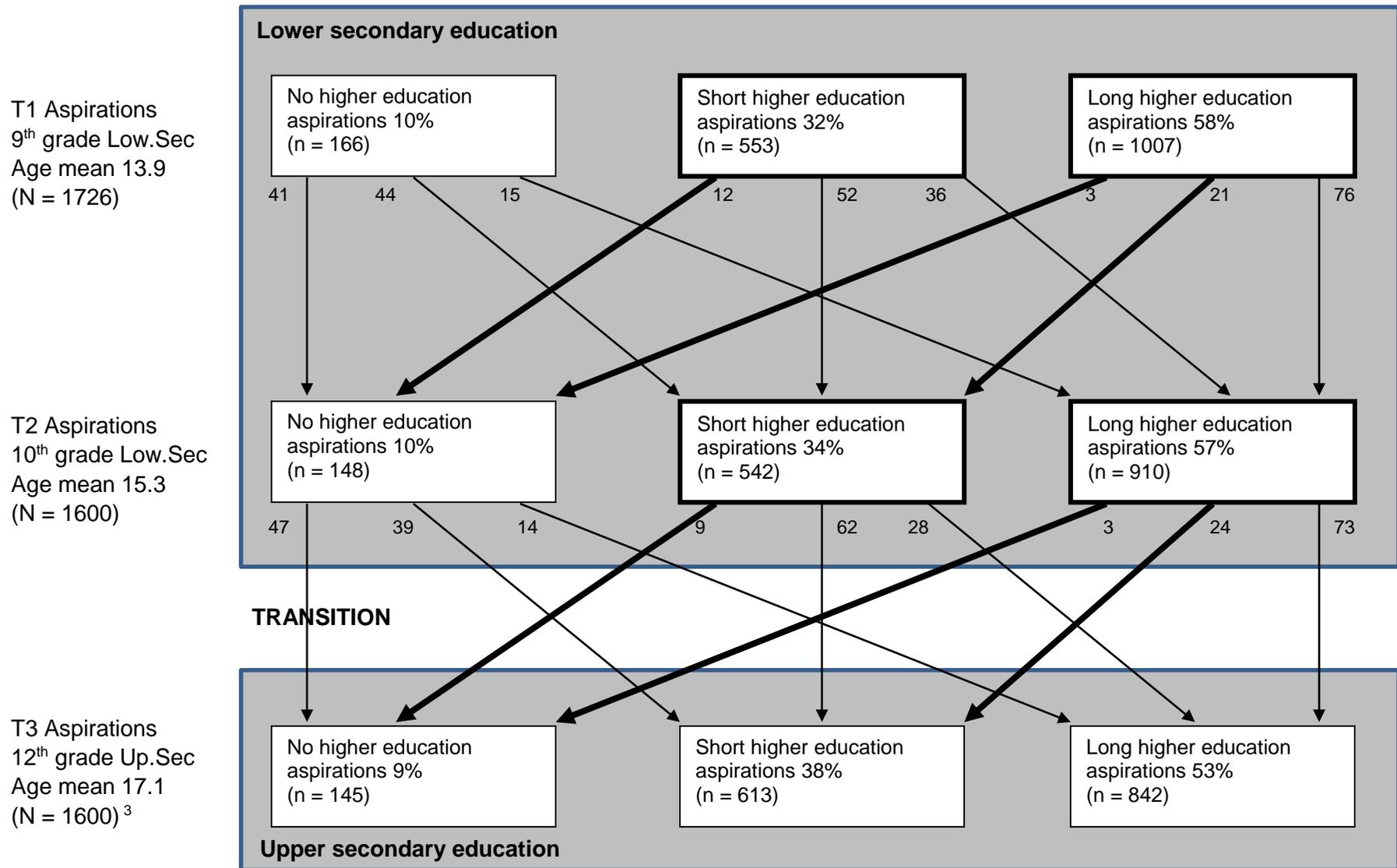


Figure 1: Descriptive statistics for initial and changing higher education aspirations, in percentages. Arrows and boxes in bold indicate the sample included in the analyses and the composition of the “decreased aspirations” group.

	<b>T1 to T2</b> <b>N = 1913</b>	<b>T2 to T3</b> <b>N = 1660</b>
Change in Higher Education Aspirations		
Decrease	16.4	17.7
Stable	54.8	60.5
Increase	15.5	14.0
Missing information	13.3	7.8
	100.0	100.0

Table 2: Distribution of change in higher education aspirations at the transition from ninth to tenth grade as they make choices about further education (T1 to T2) and the transition to upper secondary school (T2 to T3). Cohort born 1992, Oslo, Norway.

	Decreasing aspirations T1 to T2 (N = 1412)					
	Model A, aOR		Model B, aOR		Model C, aOR	
Educational resources						
School effort						
Homework (T1)	0.89	ns	0.93	ns	0.96	ns
Homework change (T1 to T2)	0.85	***	0.87	*	0.90	ns
Achievement						
Grades (T1)	0.48	***	0.52	***	0.71	***
Grades change (T1 to T2)	0.58	***	0.63	***	0.81	ns
Background variables						
Male gender (female = ref)			1.36	*	1.38	*
Minority ethnic background (majority = ref)			0.49	***	0.54	**
Social class background						
Exec. positions/profess. (ref)						
Non-manual employees			2.26	***	2.06	***
Manual workers			3.18	***	2.83	***
Missing information			2.81	***	2.53	**
Chosen study programme						
General education programs (ref)						
Modern VET programs Media/Art					2.75	***
Traditional VET programs					3.88	***
Constant	5.88	***	1.94	ns	0.32	*
Step Chi sq.	68.28	***	44.77	***	55.98	***
Model Chi sq.	48.28	***	113.04	***	169.02	***
Nagelkerke r sq.	0.08		0.12		0.18	***

\* p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

Table 3-1: Explanatory factors for decreasing higher education aspirations from T1 (2006) to T2 (2008). Adjusted odds ratios, multivariate logistic regression. Cohort born 1992, Oslo, Norway.

	Decreasing aspirations T2 to T3 (N=1351)		
	Model A, aOR	Model B, aOR	Model C, aOR
Educational resources			
School effort			
Homework (T2)	0.86 *	0.84 *	0,85 *
Homework change (T2 to T3)	0.79 ***	0.79 ***	0,80 ***
Achievement			
Grades (T2)	0.44 ***	0.45 ***	0,49 ***
Grades change (T2 to T3)	0.59 ***	0.60 ***	0,59 ***
Background variables			
Male gender (female=ref)		0.94 ns	0.95 ns
Minority ethnic background (majority=ref)		1.08 ns	1.11 ns
Social class background			
Exec. positions/profess. (ref)			
Non-manual employees		1.00 ns	0,98 ns
Manual workers		1.12 ns	1.08 ns
Missing information		1.04 ns	1.02 ns
Chosen study program			
General education programmes (ref)			
Modern VET programmes Media/Art			1.32 ns
Traditional VET programmes			1.55 ns
Constant	8.62 ***	7.93 ***	5.00 ***
Step Chi sq.	95.41 ***	0.90 ns	4.69 ns
Model Chi sq.	95.41 ***	96.31 ***	100.91 ***
Nagelkerke r sq.	0.11	0.11	0.11

\* p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

Table 3-2: Explanatory factors for decreasing higher education aspirations from T2 (2008) to T3 (2010). Adjusted odds ratios, multivariate logistic regression. Cohort born 1992, Oslo, Norway.

Decreasing aspirations T1 to T2	Bivariate analyses			Multivariate analyses†		
	Majority (N = 1122) OR	Minority (N = 365) OR	t-test	Majority (N = 1047) aOR	Minority (N = 324) aOR	t-test
Grades T1	0.57 (0.47–0.70)***	0.63 (0.43–0.91)*	t = 0.42, ns	0.45 (0.36–0.57)***	0.57 (0.37–0.87)*	t = 0.89, ns
Change T1/T2	0.78 (0.60–1.00)	1.02 (0.64–1.64)	t = 1.00, ns	0.56 (0.42–0.73)***	0.76 (0.45–1.26)	t = 1.03, ns
Decreasing aspirations T2 to T3	Majority OR	Minority OR	t-test	Majority aOR	Minority aOR	t-test
Grades T2	0.64 (0.51–0.80)***	0.30 (0.20–0.45)***	t = 3.20, p=.0007	0.51 (0.39–0.65)***	0.24 (0.15–0.38)	t = 2.81, p = .0025
Change T2/T3	0.69 (0.54–0.89)**	0.90 (0.63–1.28)	t = 1.18, ns	0.52 (0.40–0.68)***	0.55 (0.37–0.84)**	t = 0.22, ns

† Controlling for social class background

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

Table 4: Separate analyses of youth of majority or minority ethnic background for the relationship between decreasing higher education aspirations and initial grades/change in grades at two transition points in lower/upper secondary school.

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