

Summary

With a net immigration of one million to a population of nine million in 20 years, the educational opportunities and socio-economic integration of children of immigrant origin have become crucial issues in Sweden. Fears of early school failure and marginalisation have loomed large. Our study, following the educational and early labour market careers mainly of the cohort born 1996 up until the age of 25-26, shows that the large majority of those of immigrant background in fact do very well in school. They have high aspirations, are committed to their school work, aim consistently high in their educational choices, and succeed significantly more in school than would be expected from their generally disadvantaged backgrounds.

We have used two main data sets, one based on a school survey (CILS4EU), and one large register-based, with population data taken from school records and adding demographic-administrative data on parents' education, country of birth etc., as well as income and other labour market information for our cohort when they reached young adulthood. We have used these data sets to study in detail the educational careers of children of immigrant parents, asking about school performance, educational choices, and diploma achievement rates at comprehensive school (up to age 16), upper secondary school (ages 16–19), and tertiary education. In addition, we have followed our cohort into the critical phase of labour market entry, to see whether the credentials they have achieved also have a value outside the educational system that equals that of the majority population.

This is to a large extent a success story, which many will consider surprising, although it must be acknowledged that the group is markedly divided. We find relatively modest disadvantages for those who were born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents ('generation

2’), or arrived before age 9 (‘generation 1, early’), but much larger ones for those who migrated at ages 9–15 (‘generation 1, late’). Language problems are likely to be a stumbling block for this group who in our cohort constitute 29 percent of those of immigrant origin (who, in turn, represent 18 percent of the whole cohort). Although a relatively large share recuperate via adult education – a common path for those who migrate to Sweden – others struggle.

To begin with the early outcomes, generation 1 late, most of whom come from African or Middle East/Arabic countries (including Afghanistan), get a good standard deviation’s lower grades, which results in more than half of them not (at that point) being eligible for upper secondary school. The grade disadvantages for those in generation 2 and generation 1, early (15 and 25 percent of a standard deviation, respectively) are not trivial, and some origin groups in these generational categories are lagging behind. However, in a multivariate analysis, once we control for parental education and income, as well as family type, there is no disadvantage left (rather the opposite) for these groups. However, there is (more than half a standard deviation) for those in the generation 1, late, category, whose grades no doubt are dragged down by their lack of proficiency in the language of instruction.

Because of the potentially important role of language, we studied this in more detail. One concern is that, following long-term immigration and more or less persistent residential segregation, many children of immigrant origin grow up in neighbourhoods where not much Swedish is spoken, and go to schools where few class-mates have Swedish-born parents. Our results verify these concerns, not only in extreme cases, but also when looking at averages. For example, almost all those of foreign background, irrespective of generation, speak another language than Swedish at home, and around 85 percent use it ‘always’ or ‘often’ when talking to family members (more in generation 1). Fewer use it when talking to friends (and on the computer), which probably reflects the variety of origin groups in Sweden.

In school, the segregation leads to clear differences in the exposure to Swedish. Almost half of the classmates of the average pupil of foreign origin have a different mother tongue than Swedish – the corresponding figure for those of Swedish origin is 19 percent. And this propensity to language segregation is amplified when we

instead study friends, the corresponding figures being 60 and 16 percent, respectively. When we run a regression analysis on grades using self-reported proficiency in Swedish and the mother tongue, respectively, scores from a verbal test, and language used at home as predictors, all four come out as significant with non-trivial effect sizes. They are reduced somewhat when controlling also for socioeconomic origin and cognitive ability. While this suggests that proficiency in the language of instruction in school, as well as language usage, are important, the analysis cannot identify with certainty that language is the smoking gun – it is difficult to separate from other characteristics of pupils with foreign origin.

One potentially important dimension when it comes to pupils of foreign origin and educational attainment is discrimination. We have conducted several different tests of whether teachers or schools are biased in treating or evaluating pupils of foreign origin. We find nothing. We use a cognitive and a verbal test to predict grades at age 16, which wipes out any grade disadvantage in pupils of foreign origin (in fact, this turns them into a grade advantage). We study the allocation of pupils to ability grouping in maths and find little evidence that those of foreign background with the same test results less often are assigned the ‘faster’ group (or that group assignment matter for grades, for that matter). Pupils in this group are also more prone than other pupils to say that they get the help and support that they need from teachers. In addition, the patterns of disadvantage across background groups (countries or regions) when it comes to grades in compulsory school or getting an exam from upper secondary school do not suggest that groups more likely to be discriminated against fare worse – the pattern is unsystematic.

Perhaps as an indirect argument against discrimination, and certainly an argument against viewing youth of foreign origin as lacking agency, are our results of school commitment. A large majority of them are dedicated to school – they do more homework than others, have higher aspirations, more often believe that they can get high grades, feel it is important to succeed, and put in more effort into school work. Importantly, this is not just about attitudes: The gist of these results is reflected in programme choice at upper secondary school.

Students of foreign origin make much more bold – sometimes optimistic – choices of upper secondary school study programme. A

much higher percentage go for the most prestigious natural science programme, and substantially fewer choose the generally more low-status vocational tracks. This is true in total and accentuated when looking at choices at given grade levels. As a consequence of this, they have lower grades at given programmes, and so their risks of not getting a diploma from upper secondary school is increased. There is also a graduation gap (a difference in the rates of students who enroll into upper secondary school programmes without achieving a diploma) to the disadvantage of students of foreign origin, of around 13 percentage points for those in generation 2; 17 for generation 1, early; 25 for generation 1, late. However, the lower grades and more optimistic choices account for only 35–38 percent of this gap for those in generation 2 and 1, early – socioeconomic origin also play a role, but the larger part of the gap is unexplained with the data that we use. However, the grade and choice pattern account for 81 percent for generation 1, late.

We devote a special analysis to the graduation gap, because it is an often discussed issue whether it would be possible to increase the proportion of students who opt for the vocational tracks and thereby increase the proportion who make the grade. Policies to divert those who are not academically strong to more ‘useful’ vocations have been around for a long time. Other countries use various techniques for achieving this, most prominently some form of *numerus clausus* – a grade limit for the most demanding tracks. We use a simulation model to address the question “what would happen to the graduation rate if there were grade limits to the more demanding academic tracks?” The result we get is that it would increase the diploma achievement rate by 5 percentage points (ppt) for those of foreign background, but would not have much effect in reducing the gap to those of Swedish origin because their rates would also increase to 3 ppt (but this is under the assumption that the diploma achievement at given grades does not decrease as a consequence of students having to pursue a track they initially did not want to attend). The perspective here, however, is that this comes at a cost of reallocating a very large amount of students from their track of choice to one they do not prefer. Under this new regime, the current 16 percent who attend vocational programmes would grow to 34, for students of foreign background (and from 27 to 39 percent for those of Swedish origin).

The high aspirations and optimistic choices are repeated at the transition from upper secondary school to university. Students of foreign origin have higher transition rates to tertiary education than others; they go for the most demanding programmes at a high rate when they have good grades, and often even at relatively average grades. If they cannot get into the most prestigious academic programmes, they pursue a lower status programme, such as teacher, while those of Swedish origin often choose not to go to university.

Our study is the first to analyse comprehensively the path from university admission to graduation with regard to ethnic origin. Those of foreign background make the transition quicker, take somewhat longer time to graduate, but after seven years have higher rates of diplomas than those of Swedish origin. The highest proportion of graduated from university is found for women in generation 2, followed by women in generation 1, early; and men in generation 2 have higher percentage with tertiary education than men of Swedish origin.

While those of foreign background are doing well at higher education, more concerns have been raised for their labour market entry. We have studied how quickly and firmly young adults get a footing in the labour market (or succeed in tertiary education), by following our cohort up until age 25-26. In the main, those of foreign origin do well – in some cases, they lag behind, but on the whole very few are economically marginalised (NEET), although few are firmly established in the labour market. Men of foreign background do worse than women, who, on the other hand, are doing almost equally well as their counterparts of Swedish origin. It is worth underscoring that educational credentials in general tend to have a similar value for different origin groups – this suggests that worries about social exclusion among or large-scale discrimination of those of foreign background appear generally unsubstantiated.

However, there is a worrying result when it comes to potential discrimination. We find that men of foreign background who have completed male-dominated vocational tracks (electricity, industry, vehicle repair) find it harder to get a job in the corresponding area of work. The fact that this is particularly true for those of Middle East and African origin makes it likely that discrimination is behind, even if we cannot exclude the possibility that recruitment to such jobs depends on social networks or other informal channels.

In the main, our study is focused on students, even if we also have some analyses of schools. Our general – although partly indirect – conclusion is that the Swedish school system serves young people of foreign background well. Particularly those in generation 1 need more time to finish their studies, and they often need second chances. The flexible Swedish school system, with a large adult education sector, appears to be well equipped to meet such needs. We have also studied, albeit only partly, the question of school quality (and we have a chapter discussing this issue with reference to other studies). Our finding about the difference in results across schools, an issue which has attracted quite a lot of attention, is also on a positive note. When we define school quality as the grades of students in relation to their preconditions (such as family background), those of foreign background go to schools of almost exactly the same quality as those of Swedish origin. This is in a context where the school differences, controlling for student characteristics, are very small, perhaps 2–4 percentage of the total student variance in grades (a share that does not seem to have changed much since the mid-1990:s).

While most of our results are cause for optimism when it comes to the socioeconomic integration and opportunities of youth of foreign origin, there are also challenges. As we have mentioned, these pertain to a large degree to those who immigrated to Sweden at ages 9–15 (those who arrived at an older age have not been part of our study). In addition to the challenges they face, the fact that they are many, and increasing, have put Swedish schools under pressure. And even if it appears likely that comprehensive and upper secondary schools have dealt very well with this exceptional challenge, and even if a flexible educational system has been very valuable too, it is hardly possible that all those who arrive in these ages will get qualifications on par with those in generation 2 or generation 1 who arrive at younger ages. Given that Sweden's labour market is high-skilled, the future of this group needs to be followed carefully so to reduce risks of economic marginalization.

A worry that is also connected with the large-scale immigration in combination with ethnic segregation, is that many of those who have arrived in Sweden in recent years have not been exposed much to the Swedish language. The sheer volume of immigrants have led to increased concentration of non-Swedish speakers in residential

areas and schools. In the long run, this may hamper the labour market opportunities of those of immigrant descent, and, of course, also impede social integration.

On a positive note, Swedish schools now have quite a lot of experience with immigrant pupils; and young people of migrant background nowadays have many role models of similar origin as themselves, both highly educated and in prestigious occupations.