



UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM
Pedagogische en Onderwijswetenschappen

Workshop Transitions in Youth

Degrees of distance: how social background and perceived opportunity shape educational horizons



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Mismatch in aspirations and expectations

Large body of research focusses on the role of aspirations/expectations in shaping (inequality) in educational trajectories/attainment

- Criticism on strong focus on “raising aspirations” (e.g. Atkinson, 2015)
- Expectations are considered realistic aspirations (Portes et al., 2010)
 - BUT maybe downwardly adjusted by students, creating a mismatch (Hanson, 1994)
 - AND students from minority backgrounds more likely to experience mismatch?

Can perceptions help explain why mismatches occur?

- Mismatch does not arise in a vacuum
 - Students from diverse background may interpret the educational system and its opportunities differently (Merton, 1995) leading to a “perception gap” (Diehl et al., 2024)
 - Students actively interpret the signals sent by the system, and students may interpret them differently (Kerckhoff, 1976)
 - We focus on the perception of electivity (Pallas, 2003), the way students perceive how open the system is and whether they have the room to make choices in it

Research Qs

- To what extent do Dutch secondary school students experience a mismatch between their educational aspirations and expectations?
- How do these mismatches vary across social and educational backgrounds?
- To what extent do students' perceptions of electivity help explain the likelihood of experiencing mismatch?

Case: The Netherlands

- Particularly interesting for this question, due to:
 - On the hand accessible higher education: no high tuition, student support available
 - On the other hand strong level of stratification that may influence how students perceive the system and form aspirations and expectations (Geven & Forster, 2021)

Data & measures

- New questionnaire developed
 - Convenience sample
- N = 635 students in secondary education (semi-final year) across all tracks
 - Semi-final year means a difference in age (+/- 15, 16 or 17, dependent on the track)
 - However, at the same point in their educational trajectory: having chosen the courses in which they will graduate, orientation phase post-secondary education

Analytical strategy

- **Baseline model: logistic regression**
 - Outcome: mismatch (1) vs. match (0)
 - Predictors: track + background (gender, first gen, disability, cultural background)
- **Multilevel model: logistic regression with random intercepts**
 - Students nested in classes ($N = 635$, 58 classes)
 - ICC = 0.12 → meaningful class-level variance
- **Full model: adding perceptions**
 - Perceived *electivity* as continuous predictor
 - Tests whether openness perceptions reduce mismatch

Results

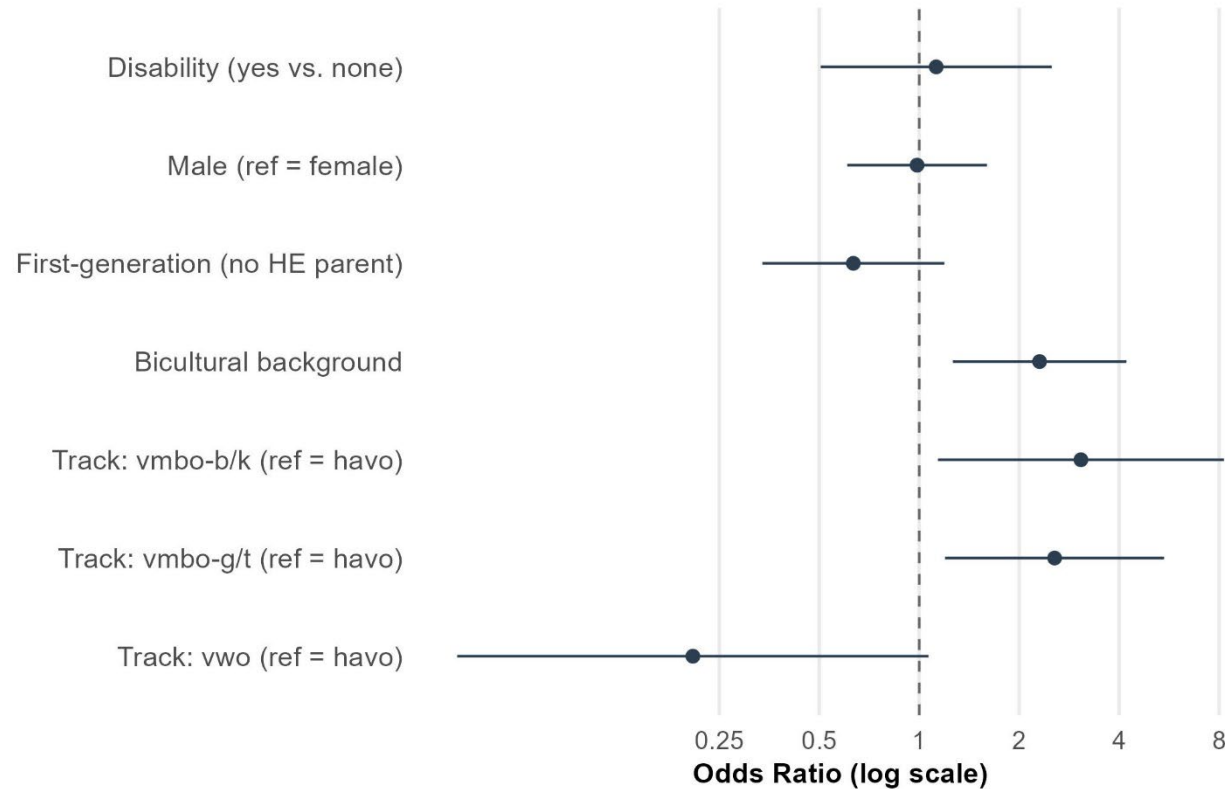
- To what extent do Dutch secondary school students experience a mismatch between their educational aspirations and expectations?
 - 14.8% of students show mismatch ($n = 94$ of 635)
 - Vast majority (85.2%) have aspirations and expectations that align

Mismatch is structured by track & cultural background

- How do these mismatches vary across social and educational backgrounds?

Odds of mismatch by track and background

Multilevel logistic regression (OR with 95% CI)



Results

- To what extent do students' perceptions of electivity help explain the likelihood of experiencing mismatch?
- **Higher perceived electivity → lower odds of mismatch**
 - OR = 0.59, 95% CI [0.42–0.83], $p = .002$

Discussion

- Mismatch is relatively rare (+/- 15%), compared to educational systems with less stratification (Khattab, 2015)
- Strongly structured by track; higher risk in vmbo (pre-vocational education), less in pre-academic education
- Students with bicultural background more likely to experience mismatch; possible link to aspirations-achievement paradox or discrimination?
- Perceived electivity matters: students who view the system as more open are less likely to “mismatch”

Limitations

- Convenience sample -> not representative (yet)
- Limited previous work on measuring students perceptions on perceptions such as electivity; reliable?
- Small subgroup sizes in some tracks



Thank you!

- Any questions, comments or suggestions?



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Table: Sample descriptives

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean/%</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Aspirations</i>			
- Secondary school diploma	24		
- Vocational education level 2	17		
- Vocational education level 3	45		
- Vocational education level 4	153		
- University of applied sciences	285		
- University	111		
<i>Expectations</i>			
- Secondary school diploma	34		
- Vocational education level 2	24		
- Vocational education level 3	63		
- Vocational education level 4	155		
- University of applied sciences	272		
- University	87		
<i>Mismatch (0 = no mismatch)</i>	635	14.8	
<i>Electivity (1 – 5)</i>	587	3.66	0.76
<i>School track</i>			
- Lower pre-vocational track	72	11.3	
- Higher pre-vocational track	258	40.6	
- General track	227	35.7	
- Pre-academic track	78	12.3	
<i>Cultural background (0 = only Dutch cultural background)</i>	635	23.0	
<i>Parental education (0 = parents attend higher education)</i>	635	25.8	
<i>Disability status (0 = no disability)</i>	635	10.2	
<i>Gender (0 = female)</i>	635	52.1	

Electivity scale

- Items:
 - I can decide which level of education I get to do after secondary education
 - If I want to choose for a certain level of education, I am free to do so
 - I decide myself which educational level I will follow
 - Dutch students have little choice to follow the education they want to follow
- 5 point Likert scale
- CFI 1.00 TLI 1.00 RMSEA 0.000 SRMR 0.009
- Omega = 0.78