



RC28 Online Conference

Social background differences in perceived electivity and aspiration–expectation alignment in the Netherlands



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Background

- Higher education access remains socially stratified (Marginson, 2016), even in formally accessible systems like the Netherlands
 - On paper multiple pathways into higher education + comparatively affordable
- Differences in access persist despite similar achievement, educational choices matter (secondary effects) (Boudon, 1974; Jackson, 2013)
- One mechanism: students' future orientations (Becker & Suckert, 2021; Sewell et al., 2003)
 - Aspirations (what students *ideally* want to achieve)
 - Expectations (what students think is *realistically attainable*)
- Reveal how students negotiate (desires vs. perceived constraints)
 - Often studies separately, but most informative when studies together (Hanson, 1994; Finger, 2016)

(Non-) alignment: what is it and why might it occur?

- Alignment: aspirations = expectations
- Non-alignment: aspirations > expectations
 - More common among disadvantaged groups (e.g. Boxer et al., 2011; Finger, 2022)
- Students form aspirations & expectations whilst interpreting the opportunity structure in which they traverse to higher ed (Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977; Merton, 1995)
 - Not just formal rules, but subjective perceptions
 - Especially salient in a tracked system like the Netherlands (Geven & Forster, 2021)
 - Focus in this study on one specific element: electivity
 - Perceived room for choice (Pallas, 2003)
 - Relevant in the NL as many students see pathways as open for much choice, whilst on paper choice is limited (Van Wanrooij et al., 2026)

Research Qs

- To what extent do aspirations and expectations align?
 - How does alignment vary by educational track & social background*?
 - How is perceived electivity related to alignment?
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- *social background -> first-generation status + cultural background

Data

- Cross-sectional survey (2023)
- Semi-final year secondary school students (y3, y4, y5)
 - Different ages, same decision moment across tracks
- $N = 539$
- 18 schools
- Convenience sample

Analytical strategy

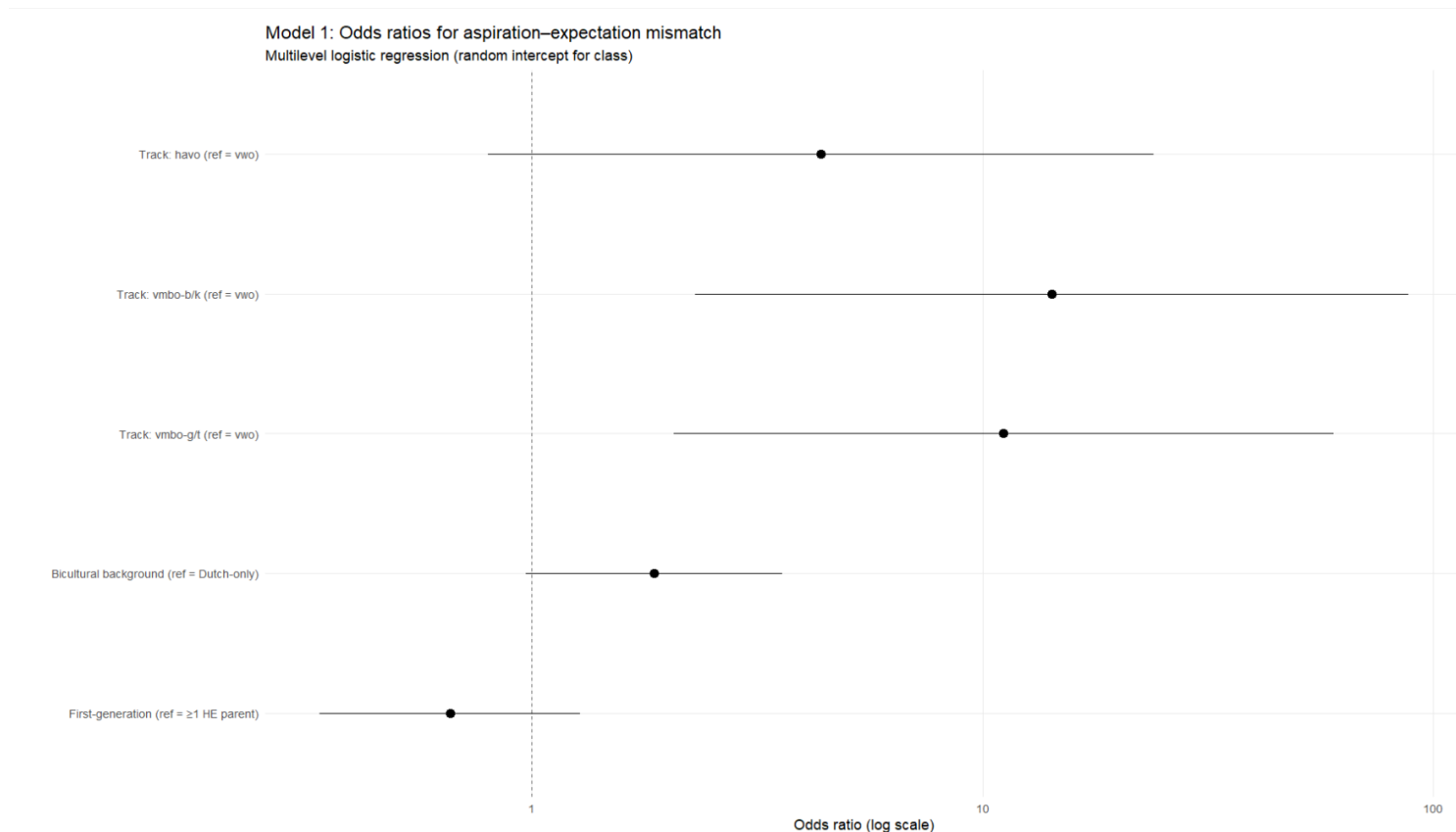
- Multilevel logistic regression
 - Students nested in classes
 - ICC = 10%
 - Three models
 1. Track + background
 2. Model 1 + controls
 3. Model 2 + electivity

Results

- How common is non-alignment?
 - 14.3% non-alignment
 - 85.7% alignment
 - Comparable to Germany, lower than England (Finger, 2022; Khattab, 2015)

Mismatch is structured by track

- How do these mismatches vary across social and educational backgrounds? (Model 1)



Model 3

Model 3 – Multilevel logistic regression

Outcome: non-alignment (1 = mismatch)

Predictor	OR	95% CI	p
Track (ref = vwo)			
vmbo-b/k	11.60	[1.82 – 73.8]	.010 **
vmbo-g/t	10.25	[1.90 – 55.3]	.008 **
havo	3.53	[0.63 – 19.7]	.152
Cultural background (bicultural)			
	1.69	[0.84 – 3.42]	.142
First-generation (no HE parent)			
	0.65	[0.32 – 1.32]	.234
Male	0.94	[0.54 – 1.63]	.831
Disability	0.98	[0.41 – 2.36]	.965
Grade Dutch	0.97	[0.69 – 1.36]	.873
Grade Math	1.00	[0.80 – 1.25]	.999
Perceived electivity	0.62	[0.43 – 0.89]	.009 **

Role of electivity

- Higher electivity ->
 - Lower odds of non-alignment
 - $OR = 0.62$
 - Partial reduction of track effects, but electivity does not fully explain track differences

Conclusion/discussion

- Alignment is strongly structured by track; higher likelihood in pre-vocational education compared to tracks that lead to higher ed
- No background effects
 - Surprised us; re-ran models without educational tracks -> still no effect. How should we interpret this?
- Non-alignment may reflect universally high aspirations and differentiated expectations
 - “Higher education for all” ideal also for students in vocational tracks?
- Perceived electivity matters: students who view the system as more open are less likely to “mismatch”
 - Does emphasizing choice empower students, or does it shift responsibility onto individuals within a constrained system?



Thank you!



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